

The lines of descent of the present crisis

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Abstract

The neoliberal settlement has been comprehensively destabilised by the 2007 financial crisis, the imposition of austerity, growing social inequalities and the emergence of populism as a social force. This article explores why institutional opposition to this settlement has principally taken a nationalist form in Britain. It does so through a history of the present by tracing the labyrinthine lines of descent and the social forces and conflicts from which the contemporary moment emerged. In particular, I show how the conditions for the emergence of these nationalist projects were produced incrementally over time and through a series of interrelated social processes. These included the caesura of the 1970s and the shift from Fordist to flexible regimes of accumulation secured by extinguishing the educated hope generated by an increasingly multi-ethnic politics and language of class; the bipartisan commitment to neoliberalism; the racialisation of class through state multiculturalism; and the long-term failure to arrest the structural decline of non-urban localities caused by the technical decomposition of class. In this explanation, the 2007 financial crash and the continuing indifference of the political elites to the deepening injuries of class and locality constituted an accelerant placed on an already emergent crisis of representation helping to engineer a transformation in the political opportunity structure by opening a space for nationalist mobilising structures to fill the political vacuum.

Keywords

British state, class, colonialism, crisis, neoliberalism, racism

Introduction

Britain today is in a state of fragmentation. Household income inequality is increasing with the Gini coefficient¹ now one of the highest in Europe. The share of income going to the 1% richest households tripled from 3% in the late 1970s to around 8% today. Life expectancy at birth – which had steadily increased between 1981 and 2010 – has stalled since 2011 and will likely decrease once excess deaths associated with the imposition of austerity and the mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic are considered (Joyce &

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Xu, 2019). Further, such class inequalities are overdetermined by the stubborn persistence of gendered and racialised inequalities. While there was always a geographic dimension to inequality in an imperial state like Britain with ‘the uneven development of the north-south divide, produced by the external orientation of the state’ (Watkins, 2020, p. 7), what is more striking today is the emergence and intensification of sub-regional inequalities not only between cities and neighbouring small towns but within cities (Obolenskaya & Hills, 2019). Consider for example the shining behemoth of the City of London and its genteel suburban outposts intermingling with the systemic poverty of adjacent working class districts along with the deindustrialised towns along its southeastern flank of north Kent. Similar patterns are traceable in Manchester, Glasgow and elsewhere as inequalities between the rich and labouring poor widen. And to this, must be added the rising intergenerational inequality that now blights this country with millennials constituting ‘the first post-war cohort to have lower incomes during early adulthood than the cohort before them’ (Joyce & Xu, 2019, p. 11).

Accompanying these social inequalities is the emergence of distinctive forms of political polarisation, particularly cross-class movements of nationalist secessionism that have contributed to an unsettling of the long-standing constitutional arrangements of the British state. In 2016, catalysed by a two-pronged Leave campaign that entwined contradictory narratives about the resurrection of imperial greatness with little Englander racist nationalism, Britain chose to sever its four-decade relationship with the transnational European Union (Virdee & McGeever, 2018). Two years earlier in 2014, the referendum on Scottish independence came within a whisker of ending the three-century union which undergirded Britain’s rise to global dominance (Davidson, 2014). This article argues that the cracks in such hitherto durable institutional foundations are the most visible manifestations of the deep structural inequalities and divisions of nation, region, class and ethnicity that scar the contemporary landscape, producing a disaffected and volatile electorate that has made the construction of consensus almost impossible over the past decade. The uncertainties that define the present moment appear neither contingent nor temporary but indicative of long-term and possibly irreversible processes of accelerating state decline.

This article offers a history of the present by tracing the labyrinthine route through which we arrived at this turning point in history. It contends that the dramatic developments of the last 15 years including the financial crash, the enforcement of austerity and the accentuation of social inequalities increasingly overdetermined by a rising tide of structural and interpersonal sexism and racism are the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. While the material and symbolic effects of these developments on different social groups amount to a social catastrophe born of disregard, neglect and incompetence (Bhattacharyya, 2015), this essay insists that to grasp the full significance of this multi-level crisis in its totality requires that we situate it within a longer timeframe.

The tendency towards fragmentation across multiple levels that we see today can be traced to at least the immediate postwar period when the democratic settlement (comprising voting rights for the working class, social welfare provision and an electoral vehicle representing the working class) forged between the ruling elites and the leadership of the domestic working class began to wither on the vine with the loss of its key financial cornerstone – Britain’s colonies. Thereafter, successive Labour and Conservative

governments attempted in vain to stabilise Britain's relative national decline through a range of strategies that included the super-exploitation of a reserve army of migrant labour subject to racist discrimination, entry into the European Economic Community, the neoliberal extinguishing of class followed by the re-making of class as a series of racialised ethnicities in a reimagined multicultural state. However, in their efforts to resolve the systemic crisis of British capitalism following decolonisation, all these Labour and Conservative administrations ended up achieving was the further erosion and destabilisation of the other foundational pillars upon which the historic democratic settlement had rested in the first place, including most notably class as a social force. When set against this backdrop, the failure to diverge from the bipartisan commitment to neoliberalism in the aftermath of the 2007 financial crash alongside the imposition of austerity that effectively destroyed the postwar welfare state (Tyler, 2020) has produced a historic crisis of representation which has been filled by competing nationalist forces in England and Scotland.²

Conceptualising class and colonialism in an imperial formation

This essay contests dominant political economy and postcolonial understandings of the present crisis. One influential example of the former is advanced by Wolfgang Streeck (2011, 2017), who interprets the financial crash, austerity and the accompanying rise of populism (including Brexit) as indicative of growing working class opposition to the fundamental tenets of neoliberalism. This interpretation of populism as working class revolt is conceptually undergirded by the relational juxtaposition of two conjunctural periods, namely, that of democratic capitalism between 1945 and 1975 and neoliberalism between 1975 and 2007. According to Streeck, the material conditions of existence of the Western European working class were significantly better under democratic capitalism than neoliberalism because the former was sustained by a

. . . political-economic peace formula between capital and labour. . . Essentially that formula entailed the organised working classes accepting capitalist markets and property rights in exchange for political democracy, which enabled them to achieve social security and a steadily rising standard of living. (Streeck, 2011, p. 10)

However, the economic basis of democratic capitalism was undermined by the stagflation of the 1970s opening the door to neoliberalism and 'the great regression' and the accompanying erosion of working class living standards (Streeck, 2017, p. 5). When the financial crash of 2007 accelerated this deterioration, mainstream political opinion remained unmoved because 'neoliberalism had become the *pensée unique* of both the centre right and centre left' (Streeck, 2017, p. 6). Feeling 'dishonoured' the working class rebelled in populist outrage demanding a nationalist alternative to neoliberal globalisation.

While there is much of value in Streeck's argument, opening his account of the present crisis from 1945 means he ends up erasing the part colonialism played in the consolidation of state formation in Western Europe as well as the subsequent economic

contribution migrant labour from former colonies made to sustaining the postwar welfare state (Kyriakides & Virdee, 2003). As the postcolonial sociologist Gurminder Bhambra puts it:

Each 'national' society incorporated a more extensive polity that was racially structured through hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion associated with colonial dependencies. . . . Colonialism . . . is central to the historical construction of the welfare state. (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021, p. 576)

Understanding Britain as an imperial state helps make transparent that the age of democratic capitalism was not just the product of intra-European developments such as the elite desire to make capitalism compatible with democracy after the horrors of fascism (Streeck, 2011, p. 10) but also the result of colonial drain arising from the super-exploitation of Britain's global labour force. Bhambra, drawing on the work of Utsa Patnaik, shows for example how over two centuries of rule – first by the East India Company and then directly by the British state – more than \$45 trillion was extracted from India alone. In this sense, Britain's ruling class established domestic 'legitimacy and quiescence through imperial revenue' (Bhambra, 2022, p. 8).

While postcolonial sociology does an effective job of critiquing the Eurocentric pre-suppositions underpinning dominant political economy accounts of the crisis, it is too limited as a conceptual apparatus to make sense of the lines of descent of the present crisis, not least because it operationalises an extremely weak conception of social class. Class is not just a structural location denoting rank as many postcolonialists claim (see Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021) but an inherently conflictual relationship of exploitation undergirding the formation and reproduction of the capitalist world-system. And at regular intervals throughout its history, this relationship has broken out into open class struggles where class becomes not just a structural position in production relations but a collective social force. This is why Edward Thompson (1991, p. 939) was so insistent in contradistinction to sociologists that class 'is not a thing, it is a happening'. 'And class happens when some people . . . feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other people whose interests are different from . . . theirs' (Thompson, 1991, pp. 8–9).³

Yet, in postcolonial accounts of imperial Britain, domestic class struggles never appear, leaving the impression that colonial elites acted benignly towards their domestic working class and gifted them economic security in an act of patrician kindness. In fact, for much of British history nothing could be further from the truth. From the outset of colonialism, the ruling elites regarded their domestic subaltern population as an inherently disposable population. Leading Elizabethan statesman Francis Bacon justified colonialism on the grounds that sending the English poor abroad would gain 'a double commodity, in the avoidance of [such] people here, and in making use of them there' (cited in Williams, 1964, p. 10). With the onset of the industrial revolution, working class children were 'harassed to the brink of death by excess of labour . . . flogged, fettered, and tortured in the most exquisite refinement of cruelty' (John Fieldon cited in Marx, 1976, p. 323).

By failing to sufficiently distinguish between different social classes within the imperial metropolis, postcolonial perspectives are unable to explain the conundrum of why

the onset of the democratic settlement was inaugurated as late as the mid-nineteenth century when British colonialism began as early as the late sixteenth century. There is no straightforward unmediated causal link between colonialism and domestic working class integration. Instead, as this essay will make clear, we require a mode of analysis that not only integrates the significance of colonialism but one that can relationally and simultaneously accommodate the threat to elite rule posed by the emergence of the domestic working class as a social force across different historical periods.

A further debilitating feature of postcolonial sociology is its underestimation of the long-standing structuring power of racism within the interior of Britain. Most understand colonialism as the universal mechanism for the production of racism, and because colonialism happens beyond Europe, racism is narrowly defined in the singular as white supremacy. As a result, when it comes to making sense of racism in Britain itself, the tendency has been to begin accounts with the post-1948 migration from the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean. In contrast, this essay insists that racism does not emerge with the politicisation of phenotypical differences (see also Robinson, 1983) because there is no such thing as an absolute biological substance. Not only are such arguments ahistorical, they mistakenly attribute race with an ontological status it does not deserve by reifying skin colour as an active determinant of social relations. The 'visibility of somatic characteristics is not inherent in the characteristics themselves but arises from a process of signification by which meaning is attributed to certain of them' (Miles, 1993, p. 87). Further, this visibility is socially constructed in a wider set of structural constraints, within a set of relations of domination such that racism is better understood as 'a set of sociopolitical processes of differentiation and hierarchization, which are projected onto the putatively biological human body' (Weheliye, 2014, p. 5) with the intention of legitimating exclusionary practices.

And because many physical characteristics (real and imagined) have been signified as a mark of nature, this proposed understanding opens up the possibility of analytically capturing different modalities of racism within Britain that have been erased by postcolonial perspectives as well as understanding the part they played in how and why the working class were incrementally integrated into the nation from the middle of the nineteenth century. For example, we know that with the rise of industrial society, the demand for labour was such that several hundred thousand migrants from the colony of Ireland were pulled across the Irish Sea, confirming that the working class was a multi-ethnic formation from the moment of its inception (Virdee, 2014). For more than half a century, this diverse proletariat refused to bend to the will of the new capitalist discipline, establishing a powerful organisational infrastructure and inventing new action repertoires that helped inculcate visions of a more expansive democratic order (Thompson, 1991).

The eventual defeat of this working class insurgency in the late 1840s gave the imperial elites the necessary breathing space to go in search of mechanisms that would discourage 'one class combining against other classes' (Gladstone cited in Saunders, 2007, p. 582) and so prevent the 'exclusive rule of a single class' (Saunders, 2007, p. 578). The resulting containment strategy of the dominant ruling bloc of Conservative and Liberal imperial nationalists aimed at incorporating a layer of skilled working class men into the sphere of democratic politics. And this objective was ideologically secured in relational opposition to colonised subjects both abroad and at home (Shilliam, 2018, Virdee, 2014).

Racist regimes of representation were articulated as discourses of gender and respectability to justify that only skilled Anglo-Saxon working men of good standing could lay claim to being active British citizens in this period. In this context, the foundational association of Britishness with Protestantism was overdetermined by the racialising signifier Anglo-Saxon such that those of Irish Catholic descent within Britain found themselves doubly excluded from the imagined national community as Catholics and as members of a so-called inferior race of Celts (Virdee, 2014).

A shared commitment to racism as well as empire were constitutive features of the politics of both ruling blocs that helped secure greater social welfare provision and an expansion of democratic rights for working people over the course of the subsequent century. By the time the Labour bloc established roots within the working class in the late nineteenth century, a political route to secure social and economic justice was already well established which directed the proletariat to situate their claims for inclusion on the ideological terrain of the nation. While the mid-Victorian imperial elites had manufactured this pathway to prevent the re-emergence of an insurgent proletariat, socialist activists prised it open further by situating their demands for social justice for the still excluded parts of the working class on the same ideological ground. While these socialist conceptions of national belonging were undoubtedly more expansive than those of the elite project of imperial nationalism, they remained incapable of including the most recent migrants such as those of Jewish descent in the first half of the twentieth century or those of Asian and Caribbean descent later (Virdee, 2014). While the subject position of the racialised outsider was occupied by different groups in different time periods, it has been a consistent feature of British working class history serving as the relational foil against which other parts of the working class legitimated their demands for national inclusion.

Welfare capitalism, empire and the racialised division of labour

The preceding discussion allows us to surmise that the democratic settlement was not inaugurated in 1945 as political economists like Streeck claim, nor with the onset of colonialism as postcolonial sociologists contend. Instead, it emerged incrementally from the mid-nineteenth century and was a product of a convoluted and historically contingent set of interactions between the emergence of the working class as a social force and the shared objectives of both the imperial and Labour hegemonic blocs to maintain domestic social order and thereby facilitate uninterrupted capitalist accumulation and colonial expansion.⁴ Racism and the economic returns from the super-exploitation of the colonies were put to work by these two competing historic blocs with the purpose of preventing any re-emergence of working class threat to their rule. Against this backdrop, the postwar welfare state settlement no longer appears as an exceptional moment of working class advancement but rather the culmination of a century of incremental working class integration into the nation secured through two competing hegemonic projects who shared a commitment to the British empire and its accompanying racisms.

However, just as the finishing touches were being put to the apotheosis of this democratic settlement (which included the establishment of the National Health Service, the guarantee of full employment and social citizenship), that ‘indispensable cushion’ (Nairn,

1964, p. 36) – Britain’s empire – began to crumble under sustained resistance from the colonised of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. The subsequent history of British politics along with the accompanying conflicts and fissures that would culminate in Scotland’s IndyRef and Brexit is the convoluted artefact of the fundamental conundrum that has stumped the British ruling class ever since: how to maintain its global geopolitical reach and revive the relative competitiveness of British capitalism in the aftermath of empire while continuing to deliver the kind of political, economic and psychic security that would guarantee the continuation of domestic social order.

Despite the loss of India in August 1947, both Labour and Conservative administrations were determined to hold onto the remaining parts of the empire that remained profitable such as Malaya and Ghana. According to the historian John Saville, they understood that ‘the flexibility and manoeuvrability of the ruling class . . . was derived from the possession of the world’s largest empire’ (cited in Hancox, 2021, p. 2). Labour Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin noted that ‘if the British Empire fell . . . it would mean the standard of life of our constituents would fall considerably’ (cited in Gupta, 1975, p. 306). Labour MP John Strachey put it more bluntly with his argument that the primary extraction of resources from the colonies ‘by one means or another, by hook or by crook . . . is a life and death matter for the economy of the country’ (cited in Gupta, 1975, p. 320).

If retaining those parts of the empire that remained profitable even at the expense of repressing anticolonial movements was one aspect of the Labour strategy to strengthen British capitalism while expanding the welfare state, then another was its importation of a reserve army of labour to resolve the crisis of profitability facing heavy manufacturing industry and fill the growing demand for labour in the sectors of transport and health. More than 400,000 workers from the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent arrived in Britain between 1948 and 1961 along with 300,000 from Eastern Europe and the Republic of Ireland (Virdee, 2014).

They came during the culmination of the inter-class truce when a century of democratising reforms had effectively secured the mental and material integration of the working class into the imagined British nation. Attachment to the twin racialising projects of imperial and Labourite nationalism was so comprehensive that there was simply no institutional space in British political culture to make sense of the Caribbean and Asian presence from a progressive standpoint. Just two days after the *Empire Windrush* docked in Tilbury on 22 June 1948 – carrying 493 migrants from Jamaica – 11 Labour MPs wrote to the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, calling for the restriction of black immigration on the grounds that their presence would ‘impair the harmony, strength and cohesion of our public and social life’ (Carter et al., 1987, p. 2). An increasingly racialised debate on immigration unfolded with then Conservative leader Churchill seeking to persuade his Cabinet to adopt the slogan ‘Keep England White’ in the run-up to the 1955 General Election on the grounds that Caribbean immigration was ‘the most important subject facing the country’ (cited in Gilmour, 1977, p. 134).

Alongside such party political and state racism, Caribbean and Asian workers were confronted with practices of social closure from parts of the organised working class. Major workplaces like Ford Dagenham, British Railways, Vickers, Napiers and Tate and Lyle operated colour-bars enforced by trade unions. Trade unionists also used the closed

shop principle to limit Caribbean and Asian access to skilled work. If such informal agreements were breached by employers, wildcat strikes were initiated to bring them back into line – a sort of DIY racism which helped enforce a hierarchical ordering of the working class based on colour. What distinguished this postwar period was the degree to which the British state, employers and workers had come to share a common British nationalism, underpinned by a shared allegiance to whiteness (Virdee, 2014).

However, this dual strategy ground to a shuddering halt as the struggles for national self-determination intensified. Britain's declining imperial reach was exposed by its inability to repress anticolonial movements in Kenya and Malaya and the nadir came in 1956 when the Egyptian nationalist Abdul Gamel Nasser unilaterally nationalised the Suez Canal that was key to maintaining Britain's pre-eminent position in the Middle East and Asia. Its loss forced the resignation of Conservative leader Anthony Eden in 1957 and symbolically it marked the end of the British empire. Between 1945 and 1964, the number of people under British rule beyond the UK fell from 700 million to 5 million (with 3 million of those in Hong Kong alone) (Brown, 1998, p. 330).

Distraught at the prospect of Britain without empire, many white Britons of all social classes projected a visceral racism onto Caribbean and Asian workers. Racist riots erupted in 1958 in Nottingham in the East Midlands and Notting Hill in West London leaving one Caribbean man dead and countless others injured. And so, the journey of transforming Caribbean and Asian workers from 'citizens to migrants' began with the introduction of the 1962 Immigration Act (Bhambra, 2017). However, for many on the right, racist immigration controls would never be enough. If the empire was lost, then Caribbean and Asian workers were the unwanted reminders of that historic loss, a painful and daily reminder of imperial Britain's defeat on the world stage. When the Conservative MP Enoch Powell made his 'rivers of blood' speech in the West Midlands in April 1968 warning of areas 'undergoing the total transformation to which there is no parallel in a thousand years of English history' (cited in Heffer, 1998, p. 451) it was calculated to stimulate those social forces opposed to the unintended emergence of multicultural Britain. The increasingly shrill calls for repatriation that followed aimed at expunging all memory of empire from the British story; it was a clarion call to make Britain a nation for whites only.

And this call struck a chord with parts of the working class. Demonstrations and strikes occurred immediately after Powell's speech, culminating in the industrial action launched by the London dockers between the 23 April and 26 April 1968 (Lindop, 2001). Such working class racism drew attention once again to the secret of its continuing weakness, particularly how institutions established to advance the cause of social justice can simultaneously become self-actualising agents in the production of racialised difference thereby reinforcing the bifurcation of the working class through the consolidation of new hierarchies of labour.

Without this attentiveness to thinking empire, racism and class together as this essay demonstrates, we neglect the processes by which racism overdetermines class experience in an imperial state like Britain and end up producing romanticised accounts of a golden age of welfare state capitalism. Instead, this section has presented a counter reading of this period that draws attention to the carnival of racist reaction emanating from all social strata that politically, economically and psychically undermined the lives of

Asian and Caribbean workers, preventing them from living a life of happiness and contentedness.

Crisis, utopian socialisms and neoliberal reaction

Over-dependent on finance capital, unable to count on the financial cushion of returns from empire or a subordinated racialised migrant labour force to shore up its declining productivity, Britain's welfare state settlement was in deep crisis by the mid-1960s. Both Conservative and Labour elites were aware of the difficulties facing British capitalism, particularly its relative decline compared to its Western European rivals. Already in 1961, the Conservatives had applied for Britain to join the Common Market – coincidentally, a move sandwiched between Macmillan's 'wind of change' announcing the end of the British empire and the implementation of the Immigration Act curtailing Caribbean and Asian migration. However, the application was vetoed by De Gaulle in 1963 and it would be another 10 years before it was finally granted entry, by which time Britain was commonly known as 'the sick man of Europe'.⁵

Membership of this transnational union was an inherently contradictory project insofar as it could never replace the empire Britain had lost. Colonialism was undergirded by an unequal economic and political arrangement rooted in extraction and expropriation of wealth from the colonies back to Britain. The EU, on the other hand, was a club of equals: nation-states who had agreed voluntarily to pool individual national sovereignty to ensure continuing European capitalist supremacy and geopolitical influence. It simply was not designed to deliver the sort of economic and social security that parts of the working class of Britain had belatedly secured through the economic returns of empire.⁶

It therefore became increasingly clear to Labour and Conservative elites they would have to reverse key elements of the postwar democratic settlement to guarantee the future competitiveness of British capitalism. And it would be a Labour government that would make the first effort to curtail the power of organised labour when it singled out growing disorder in the informal system of industrial relations as responsible for harming the competitiveness of British industry. Particular attention was focused on the ability of rank and file shop stewards to secure improvements in pay and conditions through the deployment of wildcat strikes. In 1969, the Labour government released a White Paper, *In Place of Strife*, outlining its intention to use the law to curb such collective action. Although the bill was defeated due to the pressure brought to bear on the government by the trade union movement, the incoming Conservative government seized the opportunity to succeed where Labour had failed and passed the 1971 Industrial Relations Bill. This bill proposed replacing the collectivist laissez-faire system of industrial relations with a comprehensive legal framework designed to curb workplace conflict (Virdee, 2014).

These state interventions in employer–labour relations stimulated a dramatic escalation in the class struggle. Significant elements of the organised working class recognised that living standards could no longer be maintained simply through the operation of closed shops and collective bargaining arrangements. Instead, there was an increasing turn towards taking collective action, leading to the most significant class confrontations for more than half a century. Not only did the number of strike days escalate dramatically

(Grint, 1991, p. 172, Table 7) but ‘a wide range of traditionally moderate and peaceful workers, many of them women, embarked on strike action, many for the first time in their lives’ (Kelly, 1988, p. 107).

The ramifications of such sustained resistance were dramatic, with the long-standing commonsense understanding of employers and workers sharing a (racialised) national interest unsettled as workers witnessed employers and state elites trying to undermine their livelihoods. Significant elements of the working class were drawn into the orbit of a socialist left and their principled advocacy of collective action. The trade union movement at all levels was transformed with significant leftward swings at district, regional and shop steward level, bringing to positions of influence a diverse layer of socialist activists, including left-wingers in the Labour Party, members of the Communist Party of Great Britain, as well as representatives of both orthodox and unorthodox Trotskyism (Kelly, 1988).

This working class insurgency was met with a marked shift towards a form of authoritarian statism where political features that were previously exceptional were normalised as ‘intensified state control over every sphere of socio-economic life [was] . . . combined with the radical decline of the institutions of political democracy and with draconian and multiform curtailment of so-called “formal” liberties’ (Poulantzas, 1978, pp. 203–204). The inflection point was 1971, a year which saw not only the implementation of the Industrial Relations Act but internment and mass arrests in Northern Ireland, and the passing of an Immigration Act that limited primary immigration from the Caribbean and South Asia through the introduction of the concept of patriality.

But the population of Britain would not easily be subdued. Caribbean and Asian activists had already begun the task of forging their own oppositional cultures of solidarity in response to the rise of Powellism. Existing welfare organisations like the Indian Workers’ Association (IWA) and the West Indian Standing Conference (WISC) were repurposed to fight racism alongside the establishment of new formations like the Black People’s Alliance (BPA). The latter was founded to unite ‘black people against racialism and imperialism’ and ‘seek allies from the majority community’.⁷ What defined this social movement was the shared desire among activists to forge a multi-ethnic coalition of the racialised poor that would not only mobilise against escalating state and street racisms, but for militant class politics and socialist transformation. Significantly, this socialism was more internationalist in content than prevailing British variants because the idea of the nation did not constrain their imaginary; after all, it was the entanglement of Labourite socialism with British nationalism that was responsible for enforcing their second class status. Instead, this socialism was stretched to encompass anti-imperialist, Marxist and black power influences (and eventually feminism) and reimagined the struggle in Britain as an integral part of the still unfolding struggle for colonial freedom, justice and human dignity for the darker peoples of the world (Ashe et al., 2017; Narayan, 2019).

The capacity of these activists to prise open the possibility that the suffering of today was neither natural nor given, and that an alternative, more hopeful future was possible further catalysed other working class activists engaged in their own struggles against the state and employers. By the mid-1970s, this desire to not just imagine an alternative future but to will it into existence by giving history a nudge drew many of the movements

together in a mesh-like infrastructure of dissent. It contributed to unprecedented forms of solidarity such as the growing opposition to racism in the organised labour movement, including most notably during the Grunwick Strike (Anitha & Pearson, 2018), as well as the formation of mass movements like Rock Against Racism (RAR) and the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) (Virdee, 2014). And in the process, the language and politics of class were stretched, albeit unevenly, to accommodate questions of racism and anti-racism.

Because of the tendency of both critical political economy and postcolonial perspectives to analytically separate struggles against racism (as well as other oppressions) from those against class exploitation, the scale of the subaltern revolt that marked the transition from a Fordist to flexible regime of accumulation (Harvey, 1993) has been underestimated. In fact, there was a two-decade interregnum defined by systemic and intensifying multi-level conflict from which not one, but two political alternatives emerged. The first was the neoliberal alternative of Thatcherism intent on reversing the postwar welfare state settlement (Hall et al., 1978), but the second was the New Left alternative of working class justice for all that aimed at deepening this democratic settlement, including through a reckoning with the enduring material and symbolic legacy of racism.

The transition to neoliberalism could not have been secured without extinguishing the educated hope produced by the cycle of protest I have outlined. Mrs Thatcher's insistence that 'there is no alternative' was a recognition that there was an alternative, that there were two competing counter-hegemonic projects and the New Left project had to be extinguished for capitalism to thrive. Cracks had started to appear in the system of domination because various parts of the working class were envisioning alternative futures that relied on solidarity, not in enforcing social divisions between its component parts. Such movements presented a concretised albeit fragmentary picture of an alternative to capitalism, a route out of a global system whose very survival was dependent on the maintenance of misery for the majority.

Through the political imaginary of authoritarian populism and its 'posing of central questions of government policy as problems of individual responsibility and individual choice' (Gamble, 2000, p. 143) the Thatcher project assembled a reactionary cross-class coalition that was able to present itself as a 'radical force that was going to change things' (Hall, 1979, p. 16). A reinvigorated racism was an intrinsic component of this project, helping to further disaggregate the working class. Thatcher had already signalled her intent during the 1979 General Election when she claimed that 'people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture' (cited in Virdee, 2014, p. 138) and she followed this up by introducing the 1981 Nationality Act, which effectively stopped any further migration from the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean (Tyler, 2013).

Through a combination of set-piece confrontations with key groups of workers, the introduction of legally repressive measures against trade unions and widespread public spending cuts, the Conservatives incrementally secured the technical decomposition of the working class over the course of the 1980s. And this technical decomposition of class was accompanied by its political decomposition leading to the destruction of those counter-cultures of solidarity, confirming that the Thatcherite project of neoliberalism was primarily a capitalist counter-revolution.

New Labour and the racialisation of class

Significantly, New Labour were unwilling to reverse this historic defeat when it returned to power in 1997. In fact, when it comes to any assessment of New Labour, perhaps we should have paid more attention to Margaret Thatcher. After she left office she was asked about her greatest achievement, to which her unhesitating reply was: 'Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds' (cited in Burns, 2008). With the socialist and anti-racist left defeated, the working class atomised and the language of class in abeyance, the New Labour leadership seized the opportunity to redefine the mission of the party. Tony Blair, the New Labour leader, felt comfortable declaring that 'the class war is over. But the struggle for true equality has just begun.' Its leadership redefined the party's core constituency as the 'aspirational voter' and 'ordinary families who work hard and play by the rules' (Mandelson & Liddle, 1996, pp. 17–18), while its focus shifted increasingly towards those swing voters living in the shires and southeast of England.

New Labour were not the same as the Conservatives; they were social neoliberals who maintained a reforming agenda but one that was strictly confined within the limits of neoliberal hegemony (Davidson, 2017). This consolidation of neoliberalism 'via the social democratic route' (Hall, 2005) comprised significant public and private investment in schools and the health service alongside the introduction of a national minimum wage and the provision of tax credits for working parents. The cause of racial justice was also redefined. While there remained faint echoes of a more militant past such as the definition of institutional racism adopted by the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, the direction of travel among the New Labour political class was to re-fashion the working class into classless subjects undergirded by a commitment to state-led multiculturalism. Informed by this rationale, there were early attempts to depoliticise the presence of British Asians and Caribbeans and reimagine them as merely the latest in a long history of successful migrations that make up a culturally diverse Britain:

This nation has been formed by a particularly rich complex of experiences. . . . How can we separate out the Celtic, the Roman, the Saxon, the Norman, the Huguenot, the Jewish, the Asian and the Caribbean and all the other nations that have come and settled here? Why should we want to? It is precisely this rich mix that has made all of us what we are today. (Blair, 2000)

The New Labour emphasis on multiculturalism represented a recognition of the actuality of everyday lived multiculturalism across Britain's towns and cities. However, by reimagining Britain's population as a 'community of communities', as some of the New Labour intellectuals put it (see Runnymede Trust, 2000), they helped consolidate the transformation of class into a series of racialised ethnicities (e.g. White, Indian, Pakistani, Caribbean and so on). There were dangers in crafting such cross-class racialised groups that would come to haunt New Labour in the years to come. Racial equality came to be reinterpreted narrowly as the need to ensure that the socio-economic position of different racialised groups mirrored that of the white British population through the development of social policies aimed at facilitating upward social mobility and the creation of a British Asian and Caribbean middle class.

What such an approach occluded was the inequalities faced by the working class in each of these racialised groups such that questions of racial justice were disentangled from questions of working class justice. And through this, class as a relation of exploitation upon which capitalism rests was re-naturalised. The effect of New Labour thinking was to further weaken the democratic settlement by first occluding class inequalities and then reducing the public space in which to articulate grievances using the language of class. If the Conservatives under Thatcher defeated the working class, then Blair and New Labour erased it.

Alongside such neglect of the inequalities and injuries faced by the multi-ethnic working class, New Labour also launched a programme of stigmatising and disciplining fractions of that class who it claimed were marked by a culture of welfare dependency and antisocial behaviour. The category of 'white working class' was increasingly invoked in this context by Labour politicians and a raft of remedial social policies aimed at making them fit for precaritised work in the new capitalism were developed, from ASBOs (antisocial behaviour orders) to workfare (Tyler, 2013). If New Labour's vision of the white working class aimed at 'taming' its allegedly unruly elements, another vision tried to unleash its allegedly instinctive aversion to immigration. It was from the late 1990s that the British National Party (BNP) began to make minor yet unprecedented electoral gains in local councils in working class districts informed by slogans such as 'rights for whites', followed by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), who secured even more. This message suitably re-couched was amplified by the right-wing press like *The Telegraph*, who deployed the category for their own instrumental ends, including eroding support for state multiculturalism. While the philosophical principles undergirding these projects were quite different and often in conflict with one another, they collectively helped breathe life into this category of 'the white working class' (Sveinsson, 2009).

Increasingly, in the absence of a shared language of class that could have potentially brought together differently racialised elements of the working class as in the 1970s and 1980s, one fraction was increasingly pitted against another in a zero-sum game. The riots in the Northern English mill towns during the summer of 2001 combined with the rapidly changing geopolitical environment in the aftermath of 9/11 and the war in Iraq were formative moments in the consolidation of a new racialised enemy within – 'the Muslim' (Kundnani, 2007). These developments were instrumental in facilitating Labour's turn away from multiculturalism, and towards an increasingly muscular assimilatory nationalism (Back et al., 2002; Pitcher, 2009). As a result, on the eve of the 2007 financial crash, the process of fragmentation had deepened, further pushing Britain towards a critical tipping point. Class as a social force had been erased, social inequalities were widening, racism was strengthening yet the institutional space to articulate working class grievances was now more diminished than ever due to the bipartisan commitment to neoliberalism.

Britain in fragments

When Peter Hain complained to Peter Mandelson that New Labour was at risk of being 'gratuitously offensive' by continuing to ignore working class grievances, Mandelson

replied, ‘your preoccupation with the working class vote is wrong. They’ve got nowhere to go’ (cited in Makin-White, 2021, p. 81).⁸ Mandelson would be proved catastrophically wrong. When the British economy spiralled into depression as part of the global economic collapse of 2007, New Labour refused to budge from the neoliberal consensus. Instead, it wilfully entangled the rising economic pain of the working class resulting from wage freezes and benefit cuts with anti-immigrant discourses, with then Prime Minister Gordon Brown insisting on ‘British jobs for British workers’ (Brown cited in Jones et al., 2007).

This resolute commitment to neoliberal austerity and anti-immigrant rhetoric combined with the long-standing absence of the politics and language of class carved open a political space for reactionary populists to re-cast the real injuries of class into a virulent politics of racist resentment. This process was already in progress under New Labour via the BNP, UKIP and the reactionary Conservative press. At the 1999 European Elections, just two years after Labour came to power, UKIP had increased its vote from 15,000 to 696,000 and by 2004 that vote had climbed further still to 2.6 million. Alongside UKIP, the BNP saw its vote rise from 100,000 in 1999 to nearly 1 million in 2009. When Gordon Brown left 10 Downing Street and handed the keys to Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, the BNP was the fifth largest party in the UK. Though the BNP would eventually implode, the far-right surge continued. After five years of coalition government, austerity and the failure of Labour to respond effectively, the UKIP vote rose dramatically in 2015 to a record 3.8 million. And this rise of the far-right would culminate during the Brexit referendum, which tapped these long-standing racialised structures of feeling about migration, racism and national belonging. A sizeable fraction of the working class voted Brexit as part of a wider cross-class coalition drawn by narratives marbled through with racism that promised to restore economic prosperity if only they were allowed to ‘take back control’ and stop immigration (Benson and Lewis, 2019; Virdee & McGeever, 2018).

We know that this stratum comprised in the main older workers (over the age of 45) and pensioners – resident on the periphery of cities or in small self-contained towns which had experienced recent inward migration, but who nonetheless lived in some of the least ethnically diverse areas of the country. However, what is also striking about the working class vote for Brexit is how well it aligns with those working class populations that went down to a series of historic defeats in the 1980s. Typical are swathes of former mining towns from Barnsley to Bolsover who felt the full force of Thatcherism during the 1984/5 miners’ strike. Former steel towns like Redcar along with others like Hull and Grimsby, where once thriving fishing industries were undermined first by the 1970s ‘Cod Wars’ and then by neoliberalism. And so followed the former mill towns of Lancashire – in structural decline since the 1960s, neoliberalism finished them off. And should anyone think this was a north–south divide, one need only glance at the garden of England – the county of Kent – where towns like Gravesend, Gillingham and Chatham, once home to powerful groups of workers employed in cement manufacture, paper mills, coal mines, the railways and the Royal Navy dockyard, all voted overwhelmingly for Brexit (BBC, 2016).

This pattern of heavy defeats across a range of industries during the 1980s combined with the technical decomposition of class through deindustrialisation destroyed the spirit

and combativity of these communities. Overdetermining this was the process of political class decomposition including the incremental disappearance of once powerful cultures of solidarity and socialist infrastructure built over the course of the welfare settlement. And with it went the language of class such that today in many of these towns one finds a strong sense of class disassociation, if not dis-identification (Skeggs, 1997). I am not suggesting that former Labour voters moved en masse to the political right although some did via UKIP (see for example Evans & Tilley, 2017; Ford & Goodwin, 2017); rather, the psychological pummelling that accompanied the process of technical and political decomposition contributed to a sort of resigned acceptance of one's fate. At the same time, reactionary formations were re-energising their publics in these same constituencies, leading to a transformation of their political complexion. Real working class pain – which in Britain is a multi-ethnic process – has come to be understood by substantial numbers of older working class people through a racialised lens. Such a working class break from the neoliberal settlement is not a sign of an emergent class consciousness as some 'Lexiteers' contended but an indication of its long-term absence. This is most tragically demonstrated by how a part of the working class has been summoned into the camp of the anti-immigrant right representing the 'white working class' as the main victims of neoliberalism.

Significantly, this racialised nationalist response was overwhelmingly an English and Welsh phenomenon. While the Labour, Liberal and Conservative consensus on austerity also stimulated a nationalist response in Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP) situated itself on the ideological terrain that was previously occupied by Labourite social democracy. In that sense, the nationalist project of the SNP was more progressive than the reactionary nationalisms elsewhere in Britain. While contemporary British nationalism was forged in relational opposition to the twin threats posed by the EU and immigration, Scottish nationalism defined itself in relational opposition to British nationalism. In order to distinguish itself from the content of British nationalism, the narrative of the SNP leadership has emphasised its intention to 'build a Scotland that all those who live, and work here can be proud of, a nation that is social democratic and just' (Nicola Sturgeon, then Deputy FM of the Scottish Government, November 2014; cited in *Scottish Left Review*, 2015). And there is substance behind such claims such as its commitment to social housing and abolition of the right to buy.

Further, successive SNP First Ministers have strongly condemned racism and welcomed immigration, insisting that such a standpoint runs with the grain of Scottish national belonging and the idea that 'We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns' (Davidson & Virdee, 2018). Hence, while the real injuries and inequalities of class have come to be expressed through the national question in Scotland they have not been racialised as in the rest of Britain.⁹ Unsurprisingly, it was the young and middle aged working class and middle class resident in the urban heartlands who constituted the driving force behind the move for Scottish independence in 2014 and recent SNP majorities in the Scottish Parliament (in 2011, 2016 and 2021). This was precisely the opposite of those demographics that broke for Brexit in England and Wales, reinforcing the process of fragmentation but now also threatening the very integrity of the British state.

A similar demographic to that which turbo-charged Scottish nationalism was also responsible for the belated emergence of the Corbyn project in England and Wales in

2015. For a brief moment, it appeared that the Labour Party might return to its founding principle of securing social justice for the working class but this time also incorporating demands for racial and sexual justice with an internationalist opposition to imperialist wars reflective of the multicultural populations undergirding the project. However, it would be crushed by the contradictory class forces driving Brexit, the egregious opposition of the Parliamentary Labour Party to its leader and the fact that the Scottish working class – that bulwark of previous Labour victories – had already attached its mast to that of the SNP.

Fragmentations of class, generation, ethnicity, region and nation are now deeply embedded, stretching the hitherto durable institutional arrangements of the British state to its limits. And such fragmentations mitigate against the formation of an electorally viable British-wide political project that can advance the cause of social justice. It will only be through efforts to reassemble those fragments that the working class and its allies can begin to free themselves from the degrading logic of contemporary capitalism in permanent crisis. That is, class has to happen if we are to avert catastrophe. Given this it would be remiss not to point briefly towards those countervailing trends that hint at a more progressive alternative even in this most difficult of times. At the time of writing, tens of thousands of railway and postal workers have taken industrial action across the different nations of Britain in response to the rising cost of living. This collective action, conducted by a multi-ethnic workforce produced by the everyday multicultures that characterise contemporary Britain's towns and cities, reveals a different side of Britain, often occluded in the mainstream media but one that is comfortable with difference but intolerant of inequality. And over the next few months, they may well be joined by other parts of the twenty-first century working class including call centre workers, teachers, higher education workers, barristers and many others, again from a multiplicity of ethnic backgrounds. We know from history that if such collective action is sustained it has the potential to transform political consciousness, particularly if it becomes entangled with movements for sexual and racial justice. Whether Britain breaks or a state-wide progressive political alternative re-emerges depends increasingly on whether the working class can re-make itself as a social force.

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Notes

1. The Gini coefficient is a measure of household income inequality. The lower its value, the more equally income is distributed.

2. Similar nationalist trends can also be mapped across the West and even beyond (Valluvan, 2020), indicating we are living through a multi-layered emergency of the capitalist world-system. While my essay focuses on Britain, it also serves as a useful case study analysing some of the recurring features of this global emergency.
3. I am of course aware of Thompson's methodological nationalism that prevented him from integrating the significance of colonialism and racism into his account of class formation (see Virdee, 2014, ch. 1).
4. Interestingly, similar initiatives in the areas of welfare, housing and urban infrastructure were launched around the same time in other parts of Europe, including France, Germany and the Netherlands, with a view to integrating their domestic working class populations (see De Swaan, 1988).
5. Entry was ratified through a referendum conducted in 1975 when Labour had returned to power under Wilson.
6. Later, the EU social chapter was introduced. However, this was not a product of class struggle and working class self-activity but delivered as an elite response to mitigating ever-widening social inequalities.
7. 'Black People's Alliance', *The Birmingham Post* – Indian Workers Association Archive, MS2141/A/7/4.
8. Many thanks to Brendan McGeever for drawing this reference to my attention.
9. Such a narrative is not without its problems with Scotland's complicity in the British empire erased and the structuring force of contemporary racism in Scotland occluded (see Davidson & Virdee, 2018).

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