



THE RISE OF THE RIGHT

*English nationalism and
the transformation of
working-class politics*

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TWO

Dead politics

It's the second week of May in 2015. The TV flashes and murmurs in the background as we write. The weird condensed melodrama of 24-hour news broadcasting is experiencing one of its gala events. Seeking but rarely finding an original and illuminating perspective, the usual pundits, publicists, bloggers and controversialists are queuing up to give the British people their hastily assembled take on the spectacular 2015 general election results. Contrary to the most informed predictions, the Conservatives have secured a small majority in the House of Commons.

In 2010 they had regained power after 13 painful years of opposition, but only with the support of the Liberal Democrats, which enabled the Conservatives to form the first coalition government in Britain since the end of the Second World War. It was not a resounding success for the Conservatives by any means, especially given that the outgoing Labour government had presided over the worst economic crisis in living memory. No matter. They were back and keen to get started.

Everyone agreed that the problems the Conservatives faced were significant. Since the crash of 2008, tax revenues had fallen precipitously, yet barely comprehensible amounts of money had been used to bail out 'too big to fail' banks. As the global financial system stalled, these banks found themselves on the verge of collapse and in desperate need of assistance from the state. By 2010 'tiny green shoots' of economic recovery had just begun to appear on the barren post-crash landscape, but the incoming coalition government continued to run a huge deficit. Indeed, this deficit seemed set to cast the British economy in shadow

for the entirety of the coalition's term in office. As the outgoing Treasury Secretary Liam Byrne observed in a note left for his successor, there was, apparently, 'no money left' (Owen, 2010).

Members of the Conservative Party held the vast majority of the coalition's major cabinet posts. What first appeared to be a fragile coalition – composed of two political parties that possessed, on the surface of things, very different views on economic management, welfare and social justice – turned out to be remarkably strong. It was fully capable of coping with the choppy waters of parliamentary life to forge ahead with a radically cautious political programme couched in the language of apolitical pragmatism and ever-so-careful economic management. Commitment to cautious pragmatism within the stringent rules laid down by the hard-nosed accountancy that lies at the heart of neoliberal economics ensured that five years of unforgiving austerity followed the 2010 general election. The coalition government appeared resolute in its ambition to impose a measure of 'fiscal responsibility' on what it considered to be a sprawling, expensive and wasteful British public sector. The boom times were over and the country must cut its cloth accordingly.

From the outset the new government made it clear that the first order of business was to tackle the country's 'structural deficit'. This phrase was, at the time, a new addition to Westminster's obscure lingua franca. In the years that followed it would become commonplace. It referred not to debt but to a gaping hole in the government's finances that had grown significantly since the crisis of 2008. The money the country generated, mostly through taxation, was ominously less than the money it spent, mostly on the provision of services. Each year the government needed to borrow to fund its spending commitments, and each year, as the country's total debt grew, the deficit made it harder to pay it down. For many years following the Second World War Britain had run a budget surplus that justified high spending and fuelled the optimistic assumption that any high deficit would be paid off by increased industrial productivity. But the country had deindustrialised to become dependent on the financial and service sectors. Too little industry was left to grow and pay substantial wages and taxes.

The notably unimaginative and cautious nature of Westminster politics in the post-Blair era ensured that the only conceivable way to address this structural deficit was to reduce government spending. The old Keynesian principle of deficit spending – pumping money into the economy to improve infrastructure, increase demand and boost revenue-generating employment – had been dismissed by the neoliberal free-marketeers who had dominated both of Britain's major political parties since Labour's election victory in 1997. This situation was replicated throughout much of Europe and North America. Ultimately, austerity won the day unopposed. No alternative was offered to the British people, and there was a palpable absence of intelligent discussion of feasible alternative routes forward. Austerity was presented as a regrettable inevitability, even though many esteemed economists continued to warn of the perils of spending cuts during times of economic crisis (see, for example, Stiglitz, 2010; Keen, 2011; Varoufakis, 2011; Krugman, 2013).

There was no evidence to suggest that austerity would work, but plenty to suggest that it wouldn't. The rapid adoption of austerity policies across the west suggested a blind faith in the ideologies of the market. Despite the abandonment of idealism and the onward march of political pragmatism, there was little that was pragmatic, or indeed rational, about cutting back public spending in such an unremitting manner. Pragmatism is always blind to the fact that it is the servant of a disavowed ideal. Continuing austerity suggested that western political elites and their backroom advisers and experts were simply unwilling to relinquish their commitment to shrinking the state and encouraging profitable private enterprise. In the wake of the historic financial crisis of 2008, their retention of faith in the market appeared quite staggering. Everyone knew that austerity policies would hinder economic growth and push many into poverty, but austerity was asserted without doubt to be the only conceivable option.

Many on the political left argued that the budget cuts were too radical. However, it's worth exploring the possibility that the opposite was the case. Austerity policies were, in essence, not radical enough because they failed to address the fundamental causes of the financial crisis. Austerity represented a refusal to

think imaginatively and competently about what needed to be done to secure the lifestyles of ordinary people, and it failed to take any action to prevent the repeat of the destructive financial conflagration of 2008. Given the evidence that suggested austerity would make matters worse rather than better, austerity appeared to be a kind of fetishistic self-flagellation imposed on the majority in order to guarantee that the super-rich minority were not inconvenienced too much, and could rest assured that with every passing year their wealth would continue to grow. The supposed pragmatism of austerity betrayed both the ideological and class commitments of those at the very top of our political system. Austerity appeared active and quite radical, but in reality this simply covered up a deeper inactivity. Politicians refused to address the fundamental issues at stake. Instead, they reasserted their faith in markets and busied themselves with activities that made matters worse.

Dealing with the deficit

In Britain, there was very little truly significant political debate on these issues. All the main political parties agreed that austerity was inevitable and the only feasible means of getting our economy back on an even keel. Rather than enter into a robust debate about the merits of austerity compared to other deficit-reduction strategies, Westminster limited its deliberations to the question of the speed at which unavoidable cuts were to be imposed. The differences between the main political parties were miniscule. The vast majority of mainstream politicians and elite media commentators who hung on to their every word accepted unconditionally that government spending must be cut, and that hard times lay ahead. Occasionally ministers seemed to have heavy hearts as they told voters that they were imposing cuts, but more often than not they argued that there was enough slack in the system to make the cuts without inconveniencing hard-working families or reducing frontline services.

The structural deficit was not the only problem Britain faced, but all of its other problems now seemed to relate to it in some way. Almost all state provision was to be either cut or scrapped altogether. Everything rested on accountants' abstract calculations

of income, expenditure and ‘value for money’. The real world of human experience seemed to be of secondary importance on the political agenda. For many watching events unfold on TV news broadcasts, every established entitlement that had once appeared fixed and dependable now seemed less so. What would be cut next, and how far would the cuts go?

The population was on average becoming progressively older. The money spent on pensions and care for the elderly had risen, and it was set to rise further still. Staggering sums of money were being spent on social welfare, even though mass unemployment was not a key outcome of the 2008 crisis in Britain. Given the state’s difficult financial position, it was entirely predictable that a new campaign would arise to let hard-working taxpayers know that those revealed as ‘spongers’, ‘malingerers’ and ‘skivers’ would be the first to be penalised (see Tyler, 2013; Jensen and Tyler, 2015). Politicians in government spoke directly to those struggling to get by on low incomes. ‘The problems you face personally, and the titanic economic problems we face together, are the result of welfare dependent skivers who want something for nothing. For too long governments of the left have indulged these skivers, but now we will tackle this problem so that hard-working families can again prosper.’ And there it was. A historical crisis of capitalism, caused by the state’s unwillingness to regulate the financial sector, by endemic short-termism and risk-taking in the city, and by a fundamental transformation in the hegemonic form of capital accumulation, had been ripped from its context, repackaged, and laid firmly at the door of the poorest and those with the least social and political power.

Almost all mainstream politicians seemed to agree that it was now time to reconsider the state’s promise to its citizens. The polity and citizenry must now wake up and smell the coffee. A new day had dawned. If the economic problems that had descended on us were not tackled they would become progressively worse. It was better to nip potential disaster in the bud. Brave politicians must step forward, abandon the short-termism of the party political treadmill and, appealing to the masochistic guilt that seems to reside in the same dark cultural recess as our perverse Calvinist sense of fairness and just deserts,

force the country to swallow the bitter medicine required to prevent catastrophe.

For those politicians firmly ensconced within the myopic and incestuous Westminster bubble, the reality of the country's grim situation appeared perfectly clear: the state could no longer afford to provide universal services in the way that it had done in the past. No one was prepared to admit that, as a replacement for the old productive economy, the British consumer-service economy had been an abject failure for many working people, who in reality had become nothing more than neoliberalism's collateral damage. With the plight of the real economy placed ideologically off-limits, the Conservative Party came into office promising to place the country on a firm fiscal and financial footing. They would impose unpopular policies, but they did so in the interests of all. Ossified and outdated bureaucracies had to be shaken from their slumber and forced to come to terms with a grim new reality in which every institution of government must be lean and efficient, ready to take on the challenges of delivering high quality public services as cheaply as possible. Stabilising the economy and pulling it out of the red were the priorities, and everything else trailed well behind.

'Small state' rhetoric had been reverberating around the halls of Westminster for decades. Classical economic liberalism's imperative to pull back the frontiers of the state had greatly influenced British politics before the crisis. This drive transformed the Conservative Party after Margaret Thatcher became party leader, and was integral to Tony Blair's 'modernisation' of the Labour Party. By 2008, when the crisis hit and its financial costs became clear, there were very few dissenting voices left in Parliament willing to challenge this narrative. Costs needed to be cut. The state needed to step back. The cost-efficient, waste-cutting private sector could fill the gaps, and encouraging it to do so would boost enterprise and reinvigorate the entrepreneurial spirit the country badly needed to prosper in such straitened times. Even though it was clear that the neoliberal model had fomented the crisis, there was still a general agreement that the free market, coaxed back to life by a briefly interventionist state, offered the best route back to sustained economic growth.

However, in setting out to revive the investment–profit–return cycle in this way, the state was, in effect, giving birth to its own eventual gravediggers. Once the state had nurtured the market back to health, representatives of the market would inevitably demand further privatisation, tax and spending cuts, and a reduction of its remit. Britain’s political elite seemed to be reluctant to use the state in this way, but justified it to themselves and the population by agreeing that there was no other option. The purity of neoliberal theory needed to be set aside, and the market’s representatives in government would have to countenance a brief flurry of state intervention. This intervention was very different to that of the post-war epoch. The state did not want to intervene, but felt forced to do so in the short term only so it could stop intervening in the longer term. This was no principled, long-term social democratic move to control profit-seeking and capital flight, re-invest capital or guarantee full employment. Once the market began to get moving, the neoliberal state would happily get the hell out of it and let the market continue on its merry way.

On the brink

It is important to remember the gravity of the financial crash, and just how close the British economy came to collapse. Unprecedented state intervention in the banking sector enabled the economy to overcome the initial shock, but a broad array of additional problems soon materialised. The shock of the crisis had sent markets into freefall. Surplus investment capital was languishing and depreciating in offshore accounts. The recklessness and risk-taking of the pre-crash years had been replaced by conservatism and risk-aversion. It was difficult for the investment class to find a sure thing to bet on. The dot.com bubble had burst and growth was slowing, even in the BRIC countries. Insecurity and doubt prevailed. The geopolitical situation was far from stable, and a number of sovereign states appeared to be on the verge of defaulting on their debts. Everywhere risks appeared magnified and financial markets remained jittery. In an attempt to calm those jitters, the state made it clear that it would stand shoulder to shoulder with

the market. International financial institutions were also quick to use their huge economic power to restore confidence and steady the ship. Governments would do all they could to create a financially stable economic environment capable of encouraging the investment needed to get the market economy moving again.

The post-2008 free market was dependent on a financial type of state intervention unseen in human history. The state would need to counteract doubts and insecurities, and actively cultivate an environment in which the market economy could thrive. The markets needed an aggressively interventionist state to jump-start lending, and it was up to the state to recapitalise banks that found themselves exposed to a contagion of bad debt and worthless assets. State intervention of this kind runs contrary to free market theory, but government and the mass media played this down. Neoliberalism, during these years, was changing before our eyes. Academics would need to rethink the relationship between the state and the market, but all that was left for another day.

As the crisis unfolded it became increasingly clear that the wellbeing of the market was of the utmost importance to mainstream politicians of every stripe. Many politicians and academics were claiming that we had entered a strange post-ideological epoch that had forced on us a different kind of politics. Deep-seated ideological commitments had, apparently, been expunged from the political field, which was increasingly populated by grey bureaucrats immersed in pragmatic administrative tasks. Every day government, mainstream media and liberal academia instructed us to forget the great social antagonisms of the past. Class exploitation? What was that? Economically, 'we are all in it together' – 'it' being the market. Social antagonism was no longer economic but cultural. The identitarian antagonisms that had emerged during the 1960s and 1970s were rapidly pushed to the forefront of the popular imagination. The cultural interest groups that populated the arena of identity politics were promised incremental reformist solutions for 'inclusion' provided by the market's meritocratic and impartial social dynamism. In the new modish framework of 'intersectionality', class antagonism was either incorporated as just another social relation to take its place in the queue for

attention, or dismissed as an unpalatable reminder of the world before progressive liberal multiculturalism.

However, the characteristics of this post-ideological era simply reflected the extinction of all alternatives to neoliberalism, and the transformation of neoliberalism itself into political and economic *doxa*, the common sense with which everyone was expected to agree. Once everyone had come to accept the rule of the market, there was no need for hostile ideological warfare, and no need for even passionate democratic engagement. The politics of the 21st-century's inaugural decade displayed a quite staggering degree of consensus on matters of political economy, even though our politicians disavowed this consensus and hyped up relatively trivial antagonisms in order to differentiate themselves. Ideological commitments had been discarded, their place taken by a commitment to careful pragmatic administration and growing the country's mainly service-based Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, the pragmatic strategies adopted by mainstream politicians rested on a general ideological commitment to the market and the dominance of capital over everyday life. Once the market economy was fixed, the plethora of social problems that had arisen in recent years would gradually diminish.

In pursuit of this goal, right-wing liberals argued that the sovereign individual should be freed from state control, while left-wing liberals argued much the same, with the caveat that more should be done to include minority cultural groups and help the very poorest. In this monoculture of disavowed ideology, the entire sphere of politics appeared to lose much of its traditional substance. Influential liberals of the centre and the right agreed that the best way to accomplish their goals was to cut wasteful state services and encourage investment and private enterprise. Once something approaching stability had been restored, investment would pick up, unemployment would fall, tax revenues would rise, and once again all would be right with the world. Those a little further to the left argued that in the meantime offshore tax havens should be regulated and the mega-rich should be fairly taxed to maintain services. Every politician seemed to agree that everyone would benefit from a growing economy. The interests of employees and employers,

the employed and the unemployed, the super-high-net-worth titans of Knightsbridge and the impoverished denizens of sink estates across the country appeared to converge on this issue. Market-led growth was the key, and the entirety of Westminster agreed that this mattered above all else.

This was not a genuine battle between left and right. No matter which political party you voted for, the result was pretty much the same. Great Britain's economic model had been set in stone, and all alternatives dismissed. Despite our deep immersion in an economic crisis that was driving up inequality and fomenting significant yet politically inarticulate and unrepresented anger among the people, no clash of ideologies took place on the field of politics (Winlow and Hall, 2012; Treadwell et al, 2013). Ideological commitment was signified as an anachronism, a deficit in critical thinking, an unhealthy liking for universal truths and an unwanted product of a disregard for the 'nuances and complexities' constantly uncovered by empirical evidence. Those who believed wholeheartedly in a specific social and political model were dismissed as blinkered and unable to appreciate the benefits of adopting a pick-and-mix pluralistic approach to the realm of ideas.

Across the political spectrum most seemed to agree that every strategy geared towards boosting investment and shoring up profits should be placed on the table ready to be deployed by the pragmatists in government and the apparatchiks that pulled the strings in our global financial institutions. Ideology, they said, had nothing to do with it. This was not a time to listen to the wittering of unworldly cloistered intellectuals. Action needed to be taken right now to hold together the basic economic foundations of western civilisation. The basic principles of Keynesianism and the archaic tracts of market fundamentalism would be of little use in addressing problems of such staggering magnitude. To restore equilibrium the state must be willing to debt-generate barely fathomable amounts of capital as quantitative easing to shore up failing banks. This strange hybrid strategy, that used state intervention to secure the circulation of capital, was certainly not Keynesian demand management in the traditional sense, but neither was it neoclassicism. Mindful of the loss of faith in the market after the Great Depression and

the Second World War, the goal was to return the freshly tainted market system to the position of supremacy it was destined to occupy as quickly as possible. And to do that they were willing to stray far from established market principles – but only as a temporary measure.

If this was pragmatism, it was pragmatism with a view to recreating the idealised pre-crash order, with all its inherent flaws and injustices. In essence this is no different to the EDL's yearning for an idealised industrial social democratic past in which their class, communities and culture seemed secure, and no different to radical Islam's own return to fundamentals. In the absence of an alternative future, all seek their own retrogressive escape route from the neoliberal market's unforgiving insecurity. The globalised marketplace was king and the state was its servant. No serviceable and appealing alternative existed. The hypnotic allure of high investment returns and rapidly rising property values, just like the good old days, drew politicians back to the dogma of markets like moths to a flame. After all, what does success look like for the career politicians of Westminster? How will they be judged by history? How they respond to external threats such as terrorism is important, but the real test for Britain's 21st-century political leaders would be the economy.

Money, wealth and libidinous enjoyment had supplanted the grand transcendental ideals of the modern age: equality, freedom, solidarity, justice. What were these abstractions when compared to the earthy reality of economic performance and its hedonistic rewards? People talked of their commitment to these ideals, but underneath it all only money and prosperity really mattered. Everyone from the corporate executive to the careerist academic to the mobile working-class entrepreneur wanted more of it. It was the way of the world. Consumer culture had eroded a broad range of cultural values to the extent that access to more and better consumer goods and 'safe spaces' in which to consume them had become a primary social end desired by all, a prize our politicians would bestow on us if they were successful in boosting investment and economic growth. As our identikit politicians rolled off the Westminster production line in red, blue or yellow ties, they had this phrase drummed into them:

above all else, make the majority feel richer and safer. Electorally insignificant, the very poorest simply did not matter.

Because the state had placed itself fully at the disposal of the market – bailing out private banks with its unprecedented quantitative easing programme and reducing interest rates to historic lows – it somehow needed to boost its income and reduce its outgoings. It seemed natural for the state to divest itself of assets that accrued a cost. These assets could be sold off to provide the government with a much-needed cash injection. In the very same movement the private sector would be invigorated and provided with new opportunities for profit, and the general public would, in all likelihood, benefit as consumer and leisure options expanded. In a country that had discarded labour-intensive and export-orientated industry, the service industry was the primary investment target. Many of those services that remained in the public sector were sold off or contracted out. The rationale for this was very much the same. The profit motive would help the various business entities involved in the provision of formerly public services to identify waste, cut costs and bring efficiency to an outdated and sclerotic welfare state (see, for example, Whitehead and Crawshaw, 2013; Whitehead, 2015). The profit motive would ensure that standards were kept high while costs were cut to the bone. In these hard times, the lethargy and inefficiency thought to be inevitable by-products of state bureaucracy could no longer be tolerated.

The outcomes of those five years of Tory-led coalition government are now quite clear. The gap between rich and poor continued to grow to proportions not seen since the Victorian era. The welfare state was further stripped back and sold off (Mendoza, 2015). The social fabric of Britain deteriorated, and competitive individualism solidified its position at the core of our culture (Winlow and Hall, 2013; Raymen, 2015; Smith and Raymen, 2015). A great diversity of social problems worsened at alarming rates (O'Hara, 2015). The majority displayed progressively less empathy for those who found themselves impoverished, sick or otherwise at the margins of British society (Tyler, 2013). The logic of the market economy achieved a fully doxic position as the timeless and immutable common sense to which all mainstream politicians must subscribe (Varoufakis,

2013). Over the coalition's five years in office, simmering anger and dissatisfaction were stoked up further by the growing gap between ordinary people – facing diminished job prospects, falling incomes and reduced state services – and the professional politicians of Westminster who refused to budge from their commitment to the free market.

The Liberal Democrats' performance in the 2010 election was, at the time, quite startling; it seemed that many disillusioned Labour and Conservative voters had switched their allegiance in the belief that the party could effect real change and bring some much needed moral energy and ideological contestation to Britain's ailing two-party system. However, after five years in coalition government, it became clear that the Lib Dems were simply a small party committed to the same orthodoxies as the Conservative and Labour Parties. The Lib Dems possessed no real dynamism and offered no real alternative. When chances presented themselves they failed to challenge the political and economic conventions of the day. They had not spoken up for those most in need of a vocal and steadfast advocate. As the general shape and trajectory of the 2010–15 coalition became clear, yet another putative alternative revealed itself to be a sham, and support for the Lib Dems sharply fell away.

The magic money tree

It is important to keep in mind that the true causes of the 2008 economic crash – which will continue to shape our economies for many years to come – cannot be reduced to the tendency of left-of-centre governments to spend beyond their means. The success of the narrative that accuses Blairite 'third way' governments of irresponsibly lavish spending binges during the boom times, leaving the governments that followed to pick up the tab, has been truly remarkable. It has been repeated so often by politicians and media pundits that it has encouraged many to conclude that it must be true. The narrative benefits from a folksy wisdom: it seems to make sense because its central issues have been reconfigured to fit in with common experience. The average household in Britain now carries somewhere in the region of £10,000 in unsecured debts – mostly overdrafts,

personal loans and credit card debts (Press Association, 2015; see also Horsley, 2015 for a detailed analysis) – so it is easy to see why so many ordinary people were able to construct an analogy between national and household economics as the basis for understanding and believing this account of the cause of the crisis. It is, of course, quite absurd to suggest that national debt is even remotely similar to household debt. Unlike households struggling to pay debts, sovereign nations have the capacity to validate and print their own currency, tax imports and so on. The Bank of England also has the ability to set interest rates and control the money supply. Quite clearly, the debts faced by sovereign nations are entirely different to those faced by households. But we must recognise that this narrative achieves primacy precisely because all mainstream politicians and mass media controllers have bought into it.

Even the current crop of Labour politicians, many of whom were in government when news of the crisis first broke, admit that mistakes were made. With hindsight, they should have perhaps pulled back on spending to level out the boom, banking the money safely so it could be drawn on when the hard times returned. Many politicians on the left blamed decadent risk-taking individuals for the crisis, or the inaction of back office regulators in the banks, or the greed that has become so integral to the culture of the investment banking industry. However, they offered only a moral critique of the anti-social rich when what was necessary was an objective analysis of the huge risks associated with abstract financial markets as they tried to come to terms with permanent low growth and surplus capital in a world of declining resources and saturated consumer markets. Once we understand that capitalism is energised solely by individuals seeking their own economic best interests, and that it actively cultivates forms of social life and subjectivity that revel in competition and personal achievement calibrated against the downfall of ‘losers’, we can begin to see that moral critique is of little use to us. In the build-up to the 2008 crash, the investment banking industry’s front office risk-takers, aided by the middle office ‘quants’ who design rickety high-risk financial instruments, were simply doing what they were supposed to be

doing. Corporations exist to make a profit. Everything they do is orientated to this end.

The high-profile front office denizens of the investment banking industry are not ‘geniuses’ but simply salespeople with a knack for identifying profitable investment opportunities and convincing investors to invest. They thrive on risk-taking, competition and one-upmanship, and, of course, they tend to be attuned to the dog-eat-dog world of high finance. They are unadorned liberals in the classical sense: they believe absolutely that individuals act in relation to their own perceived economic best interests. To argue that this group of people – all of whom had the profit-at-all-costs ethos drummed into them during their corporate socialisation – should have withdrawn from opportunities to turn a profit and focused instead on the wellbeing of others, and the overall integrity of the global financial markets, is sheer wishful thinking. Throwing out the bad capitalists and replacing them with good capitalists is not an option, because the moment a capitalist abandons economic self-interest he is no longer a capitalist.

Only a few of those outside democratic politics – mainly marginal academics, campaigners and political activists – were capable of identifying market capitalism itself as the ultimate issue at stake. However, these outsiders were simply denied a voice in mainstream politics, media and academia. Thus they were denied the opportunity to broadcast truths about the capitalist market, its founding principle of unequal exchange and its inherent tendency towards reckless and amoral profit-seeking and chronic instability. Therefore the people could not be brought into an encounter with the fundamental causes of the crisis. The long-running evolution of capitalism and the rise of abstract financial speculation and trading were barely discussed beyond the university campus. There was little mention of the growing gap between the abstract financial markets and the real economy that produces useful goods, and in which ordinary people find their work, livelihoods and security. When it was mentioned, it was done in measured terms and framed as a problem to be solved by boosting the sort of regulation and taxation that investment bankers are expert at avoiding.

It seemed impossible to go much further than this. The spectrum of British politics had changed so much that even to propose modest forms of social democratic intervention – perhaps beginning with a national investment bank, the renationalisation of key industries and services such as energy and the railways, and a concerted attempt to raise tax revenues from corporations and the super-rich – were represented as illiberal, even the slippery slope to communist totalitarianism. What between 1945 and 1979 had been a centrist economic orthodoxy to which both political parties adhered was dismissed out of hand. All who advocated such measures were unceremoniously catapulted to the margins of politics, academia and mass-mediated culture. The metropolitan elite who had seized control of British politics, media and much of the education and research system remained utterly dedicated to the continuity of free-market capitalism. The liberals of the Labour Party had, they believed, learned the economic lessons of the 1970s and the political lessons of the 1980s. They had learned to appreciate Hayek, Friedman and the benefits of the free market, and they had learned that above all the voters of middle England wanted personal prosperity and the promise of upward mobility.

Mainstream politicians across the political spectrum argued constantly that the staggering wealth of the super-rich benefited all. Those who suggest otherwise simply revealed themselves to be envious losers opposed to individual economic freedom. Those who maintained a commitment to the principles of social democracy and recoiled at the anti-social and environmentally destructive tendencies of unabashed neoliberalism were now derided as commies, Trotskyites, the traitorous enemy within. For those at the centre, it all seemed so obvious: the rich were not the enemy. Those who continued to portray the rich in this way were simply relics from the past. It was clear to anyone with a brain that without the risk-taking and boundless ingenuity of the new corporate elite we would all be destitute, and our economy would be in ruins. If the free market remained free and those who populate it were allowed to go about their business unimpeded we would all *eventually* see our standards of living improve.

It was not simply that the leading lights of New Labour grudgingly went along with this; rather, they were active, card-carrying advocates of the free market. For 13 years under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown they had been in the driving seat, during which time they did much to advance this agenda. Inequality grew. Brown, in particular, argued strongly for the benefits of light-touch regulation and the free movement of capital. By this time New Labour was no longer really a socialist or even a social democratic party in the proper sense. Indeed, the Blairite party elite were no longer dedicated to advancing the interests of labour. The Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) had stylishly sashayed, Pinot Grigio in hand, across the political spectrum to occupy ground traditionally associated with the political right. Once there they blithely rewrote history, claiming that this had always been the Labour Party's natural uncontested position. This ground was rightfully theirs.

Ideologically, though, the move was shrouded in fetishistic disavowal, a psychological technique that allows the individual to choose to systematically repress and ultimately forget truth. The individual can disavow knowledge of that which is upsetting, injurious or sensitive by pushing it from consciousness into the unconscious. In this case, the good neoclassical liberals of New Labour were able to strip their own cynical revisionist political activity of all negative connotations and repackage it as a good and necessary thing. They set out to convince themselves and others that they were still dedicated to their traditional task of improving the conditions of working people throughout an increasingly classless society, and their bone-crushingly obvious move to the right had not been a move to the right at all. They had simply recognised that some of the old commitments of the Labour Party needed to change.

New Labour looked out upon what it saw as a totally transformed political and economic vista. The rabble-rousing of the past was counterproductive. The interests of workers were now to be advanced in tandem with the interests of employers, investors and shareholders. Working men and women did better when hedge-fund managers, sprawling corporations and the new global super-rich did better. At some point the wealth would all trickle down. The time for class conflict was over. Indeed, all

talk of social class was silenced. It was all rather unseemly, totally outdated and ultimately useless in helping Britain adapt to the remorseless competition of the new global marketplace. Instead, New Labour concerned itself primarily with those who aspired, with its bleeding heart reserved solely for those who could be expediently defined as the ‘deserving poor’. Its great endeavour was to turn Britain into a meritocracy, but little consideration was given to the able-bodied who failed to display the social ambition and upgraded occupational skills that would ensure their own upward mobility.

It is worth reminding ourselves that meritocracy was a concept created in jest. It was never supposed to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the joke did not seem to register with the new generation of party apparatchiks that allocating resources to those who possessed ‘talent’ – a quality squeezed into one dimension, hardened and impoverished by the demands of the marketplace – was scarcely more just than allocating resources on the basis of one’s family bloodline. By this time the cult of the entrepreneur, constantly shoved in the population’s face by mass media and politicians alike to the extent that some became TV celebrities, had transformed our values and popular culture to a mode in which being ‘talented’ had become synonymous with advancing one’s own personal interests by means of sharp business dealing. Alternative sources of value had been sucked into the money nexus. ‘Talent’ translated exclusively into business and wealth, and it was business and wealth that really mattered.

The Labour Party’s commitment to equality gradually morphed into a commitment to ‘equality of opportunity’. New Labour could now focus on enabling hard-working and talented members of the lower orders to set about the task of transforming their lives and their circumstances. This is how we were to beat inequality. Little thought was given to the majority who failed, for whatever reason, to win out in the competitive struggle for personal success and got left behind. Still, New Labour now held a special place in its heart for those who strived. The term ‘striver’ entered the popular lexicon. New Labour’s long-standing commitment to common ownership was discarded. Generally, New Labour swam with the tide and accepted the triumph of

individualism over old-fashioned ideas rooted in collectivism and solidarity.

By the time Tony Blair was ousted from political power, his brand sullied by illegal invasions, widening social inequality and constant kowtowing to the United States of America, the majority of the PLP were dedicated neoliberals, true believers in the benefits of the free market and its growing army of entrepreneurs. However, one or two characteristics still separated them from their brethren in blue on the other side of the debating chamber. Some of New Labour's neoliberals still retained a degree of guilt about their neoliberalism, and that guilt encouraged the adoption of a philanthropic attitude toward the disadvantaged, which occasionally leaked over the boundary separating the 'deserving' from the 'non-deserving'. They had not yet fully hardened themselves to the suffering of others, and were not yet convinced by the voluntarist doctrine that the poor brought all their problems upon themselves.

Had they been a little more honest with themselves, New Labour's slightly guiltier neoliberals would have admitted that they had uncritically adopted too much of Thatcher's market deification and anti-social dogma. They had blindly rushed after a Conservative Party, itself undergoing its own significant changes, in the hope of appealing to a small number of swing voters in marginal seats who appeared capable of pushing election results one way or the other. The working-class grassroots of the party were treated with disdain, and the solid Labour seats in Scotland, Wales and the North of England were forgotten. New Labour's rush for the centre ground drew its attention away from the fact that since 1979 the centre of the British political spectrum had been moving to the right. They threw off their ill-fitting, old-fashioned workerist garb and clad themselves in the trendy new attire of individualism, achievement, freedom and competition. The PLP became aloof and unconcerned about the things that mattered to the men and women who populated their constituencies and continued to vote Labour in the absence of a more appealing alternative. Traditional Labour voters were taken for granted. The PLP was convinced that, no matter what, these voters could never bring themselves to vote for the Conservatives. Thus the PLP felt confident that adopting

policies likely to appeal to swing voters was the best strategy in the fight to secure office. The working class in the former industrial heartlands, decaying inner cities and excised semi-rural settlements could be forgotten. The focus should be on undecided voters in middle England, voters with no traditional class allegiance to either of the main political parties; voters who could, at a push, when conditions were temporarily conducive, be persuaded to vote New Labour instead of Conservative.

As time passed it became increasingly obvious to all that New Labour had become totally disconnected from the core principles on which the original Labour Party was founded. It was not a party of the working class or those who aspired towards social justice, and it was no longer a party that guaranteed economic participation and redistribution of wealth. The PLP had cut itself adrift from its own political and cultural history to fulfil its desperate yearning to win office. It had followed Thatcher and Blair in meekly accepting the stringent rule of the market over everyday life. The rough-hewn labour politics of the past were forgotten. The party's roots in the trade union movement were forgotten. The party's commitment to redistribution and social justice were forgotten. The party had been taken over by liberals, and these liberals were sure that the party was theirs by right, a sentiment evidenced quite recently by the upper-class Blairite MP Tristram Hunt's recent appeal to the Oxbridge elite to re-establish control of a Labour Party dumped 'in the shit' by the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader (Perraudin, 2015). Anyone who spoke of traditional commitments was shouted down and dismissed as a pound-shop Trot, an anachronism, a splitter, an electoral liability who should be unceremoniously kicked out.

This process was aided by the active recruitment of intellectually undercooked PPE graduates, Blairite marketeers and third way social administration functionaries principally concerned with forging lucrative careers as professional politicians. However, even these entryist apparatchiks, most of whom had little knowledge of the pressures faced in the real world by ordinary men and women, were still keen to distinguish themselves from the Tories. Following Blair, they remained dedicated to the market and the reallocation of resources upwards, but they hoped to convince voters that they were marginally less beastly

than the Tories. They would agree with the Tories on economic issues, but sought to distinguish themselves by, on the surface of things, defending the welfare state and funding a range of measures to help the poorest. For the Blairites – convinced that neoliberal capitalism creates a rising tide that lifts all boats rather than a tsunami that swamps all but the biggest – all social groups thrive in a growing economy. This, in turn, meant that every effort must be made to ensure that business leaders were freed from the burdens of regulation and taxation so that they could drive economic growth through innovation and investment. For New Labour, the gap between rich and poor mattered little as long as both groups did better in economic terms.

Freedom for the wealth creators

Central to Blair's 'third way' was the belief that freeing the 'wealth creators' from state intervention would drive economic growth, and as a consequence of this, more tax money would flow into the coffers of the exchequer. This money could then be used to attend to some of the more pressing needs of the poorest. However, after the crash it became increasingly obvious that, in an effectively borderless global economy in which technological innovation enabled money to traverse the world instantaneously, the nation-state was entirely incapable of ensuring that corporations and the new super-rich paid what they owed. The tax avoidance industry was by this time pervasive, complex and highly advanced in its methods. Corporations were increasingly savvy to the benefits of offshoring taxable income in competitor states where corporate tax rates were lower. Money earned in the UK by big-name corporations could be registered as income in offshore tax havens. Money that could have been used to address welfare funding or the structural deficit was simply claimed and retained as temporarily dormant surplus capital waiting for the next high-return investment opportunity anywhere in the world. The general reluctance to address this problem ensured an unseemly race to the bottom. States transformed themselves into 'economic actors' and competed against neighbouring states to lower corporate tax as much as need be to attract corporations and super-rich individuals onto their territory. Of course, for

corporations this was a win-win situation. A detailed analysis carried out in 2012 suggested that between £13 trillion and £20 trillion has been hidden away in the offshore banking system (see Stewart, 2012; see also Shaxson, 2012).

Neoliberalism is, of course, extremist, and the problems it causes are extreme, but this demonic label is reserved exclusively for any substantive opposition. The 'far left' – that is, the left that proposes to build a new socioeconomic system on a firm commitment to equality and social justice – was, of course, locked out of popular debates about the crisis. Those 'extremist' elements of leftist politics that remain committed to moving beyond global capitalism were dismissed as simply beyond the pale. An unpalatable reminder of the class antagonisms of the 20th century, they had committed the cardinal sin of failing to move with the times. The politicians and media commentators who occupied the mainstream placed the radical left who talked of equality and social justice in the same category of retrograde extremism as the radical right who talked of racial purity and the defence of the homeland, or the Stalinists who in another era sent dissenters to the Gulags. Only atavistic ideologues intoxicated by the prospect of imposing their rigid ideological blueprints on an inherently pluralistic social world populated by freedom-loving individuals exercising their inalienable right to enrich themselves would ever dream of dispensing with the productive and organisational wonders brought to us by new 'creative' markets and driven forward by the profit motive. Even during times of global economic crisis, and right across the spectrum of mainstream western politics, there remained a steadfast commitment to the by-now mythical 'free market'.

However, as we have seen, neoliberalism's idealised 'free market' is in reality an unstable, crisis-ridden state- and taxpayer-funded chimera that is yet to deliver the steady economic growth of the regulated post-war social democratic years. The growth that has occurred since the rise of global neoliberalism has been patchy to say the least. Nevertheless, despite the rise of oppositional groups like Occupy, and despite a growing awareness of proliferating harms and injustices, global neoliberal capitalism is still the only game in town. People across the west structure their ambitions, dreams and desires in relation to it. Every imaginable alternative

political and economic system seems immeasurably worse by comparison. Capitalism had, most people believed, delivered to us untold riches and an unprecedented material quality of life. It had driven forward scientific discovery and filled our world with technological wizardry and the sensuous delights of consumerism (see Miles, 2015). Marx's 19th-century capitalism, based on the brutal expropriation of surplus value created by workers, has been superseded. To reinforce the system's ideological framework the compulsory celebration of capitalism's benefits, orchestrated by the dominant political and media class, encouraged a relativistic acceptance of the system's hugely problematic undercurrents and outcomes.

Even though a cursory inspection of Britain's employment practices and working environments might suggest that early capitalism's tendency to brutal exploitation had been overcome, western corporations had, like taxable income, offshored their sweatshops and satanic mills. Neoliberalism has not fostered a culture of *denial*, as Cohen's (2000) outdated thesis suggests, but a culture of *acceptance* among the everyday population. Our political and cultural leaders are also quite willing to take the risk of publicly admitting that brutal exploitation and harm of the capitalist kind can now be found in the developing world, where workers toil in dangerous conditions for incredibly low rates of pay in order to ensure that westerners are able to access relatively cheap consumer items. Things were bad, there was no denial of that, but our leaders stressed that even in the most impoverished areas things were improving. Even those working in brutal and insecure conditions in the developing world are no longer starving, and even in those areas where people continue to starve, they are no longer starving in the numbers they once had been. Thus we should accept the way things are because as long as nations comply with neoliberal logic, these things are not fixed and continue to improve. Eventually, capitalism and the magic of the market will deliver us from evil.

However, the sentiments expressed by supporters of the EDL later in this book suggest quite clearly that, as far as they are concerned, in the reality outside the unending neoliberal pep talk that dominates politics and the mass communications system, the democratic system in Britain has failed. This reality

is founded on a simple economic anomaly characteristic of advanced global capitalism – returns on capital are greater than growth in the real productive economy (Piketty, 2014). Labour-intensive production centres are therefore viable only in regions of cheap labour, land, materials and taxes. Now into their third generation, the inhabitants of the old English industrial regions can sense their own historical redundancy, and regard as an incontrovertible fact their grounded perception that their former champions and protectors, the Labour Party and the liberal left in general, have nothing of any substance to offer them. To these discarded workers the metropolitan middle class's posturing hipster communism and shrill identity politics is particularly galling. Thus eyes turn to the right, and the far right appears on the radar screen as the only alternative option.

The rise of UKIP

In the early years of the 21st century UKIP drew a great deal of support precisely because it sought to challenge the dominance of the Labour and Conservative parties. The dourness of the political scene, with its stage-managed theatrics, interminable fudging and meaningless blathering on, had prompted the electorate to lose interest and grow cynical, but here was a political party that hoped to challenge and depose the dominant Westminster orthodoxy.

UKIP had originally been a left-of-centre Eurosceptic party, founded in 1991 by the London School of Economics (LSE) historian and former liberal Alan Sked, but it rapidly shifted across the political spectrum as it learned to move beyond mere Euroscepticism to play on traditional concerns about nationhood, culture and the threats posed by immigrants. These were issues of great importance to many, but vigilantly avoided by the major political parties, or else their representatives spouted vacuous platitudes in the hope of sounding statesmanlike and multicultural, while at the same time being so consummately vague that no one could be either soothed or angered by what had been said. The number of immigrants coming in to the country had risen substantially, and many living in working-class

neighbourhoods were keenly aware of this significant change and anxious about the future.

Unable to locate and understand the objective source of their fear in the recent convulsions of the global capitalist system, and working in the intellectual darkness created by its ideologues of right and left, UKIP helped them to reach the conclusion that the rapid arrival of large numbers of immigrants was disrupting their community life and diluting their culture. They felt that their chances of finding and keeping a reasonably remunerative job were declining as new economic competitors made their way to the UK to undercut wages and work competitively long hours. Tired of following the Calvinist command to blame themselves for their loss of work and status, and unable to blame capitalism's abstract system, once again they identified a scapegoat. There was little cultural 'Othering' associated with this – UKIP had officially confirmed their suspicion that a concrete threat had moved into their territory, and, once again, they believed. At last, it seemed that a political party had come into being that was willing to defy convention and talk honestly about an issue of genuine importance. While the party has a leafy Home Counties feel to it and its leader Nigel Farage was formerly a finance industry denizen, the overwhelming majority of its support in the 2015 election came from the white working class.

Farage set out to cultivate a 'man of the people' demeanour. He was remarkably successful. He quickly drew support because at the time he seemed quite different from the vacuous identikit politicians who dominated Westminster. He spoke openly and in a manner which suggested that his responses were unscripted. He appeared in innumerable photos drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. Here, it seemed, was a man we could all relate to: devoid of airs and graces, a man who enjoyed a drink and talked knowledgeably and passionately about immigration and its effects. Perhaps more to the point, he showed disdain for the political conventions of the day, and set himself apart from Westminster's shallow, presentational political correctness.

When attacked and labelled a racist, Farage responded by suggesting that he was only raising issues that were of genuine importance to everyday people. There was, he said, nothing inherently racist about arguing for tougher immigration controls.

He also spoke with great commitment about the need to defend British jobs and the threat posed by unchecked immigration to the nation's culture and heritage. He talked of reaffirming British sovereignty and withdrawing from the European Union (EU). For him, Britain's involvement in the EU meant that billions of pounds were being wasted on pointless bureaucracy. Policies that harmed Britain were being forced on the country by grey bureaucrats who cared little about the problems faced by ordinary men and women. He said that ordinary people would be immeasurably better off if the country shifted course and withdrew from the EU. It was a broadly felt desire for palpable change that allowed UKIP to grow so quickly into a genuine force in British politics.

However, the rise of UKIP must be placed in an appropriate context. It would be entirely wrong to dismiss UKIP voters as stupid racists who draw sustenance purely from the ideologies of historical imperialism and 20th-century nationalism. In the absence of any other mode of understanding, UKIP's anti-immigration policies often seem quite logical and attractive to those members of the white working class who remain very anxious about their jobs and status. From their point of view, as we will see, more migrants simply mean more competition for jobs, security and status. For many voters the threats posed by mass immigration are quite clear. If immigration is allowed to continue at current levels, they believe, it will become progressively harder to get and keep a job, and increased competition will suppress wage levels. UKIP's drive to close the UK's borders might seem a rather basic strategy if the goal is to secure the economic security of the nation, but to many white working-class voters this seemed like a perfectly reasonable and entirely necessary practical move, and one likely to deliver immediate success.

Beneath Farage's raffishness and UKIP's headline-grabbing anti-EU and anti-immigration policies lies a highly conventional commitment to the free market. On the surface of things, UKIP appears to be defying convention, but if we look a little deeper, it becomes obvious that it is, in fact, a populist right-wing party committed to lowering taxes, shrinking the state and reinvigorating British business. Understandably enough,

we hear a great deal about UKIP's desire to close the nation's borders to immigrants and its desire to drag the nation clear of the structural ineptitude of the EU, but little has been said about its approach to economic management. UKIP has itself remained quite vague about these issues, and few detailed policy suggestions have been placed before the British people. However, judging by those policy suggestions made available, it seems that UKIP hopes to drive new forms of competition and create in Britain a more dynamic market for capital accumulation. It also hopes to significantly reduce taxation and shrink still further current welfare provision. Of course, these issues often appear to escape the attention of working-class voters attracted by UKIP's swashbuckling anti-Westminster rhetoric and its promise to reduce immigration. Should we assume that, when working-class voters vote for UKIP, we are witnessing yet another instance of the poorest voting against their class interests? If so, the absence of a true alternative in popular culture looks to be backfiring more dangerously than anyone imagined – so dangerous is this political turn, in fact, that the liberal left and the Labour Party might never dare admit the crucial part they played in it.

What ex-working-class voters would get with a UKIP government is hard-core Thatcherism, perhaps with a nastier Randian edge to it, tougher immigration policies, withdrawal from the EU, closer ties with corporate USA, and greater susceptibility to the strategies of the global finance industry. UKIP accepts the ultimate horizon of neoliberal economic management. However, its desire to defend British business appears slightly confused. Is it really possible to commit to the free market while at the same time defending the interests of British business and labour? Are the interests of British business best served by withdrawal from the EU, which is Britain's primary export market? And given the dispersed and shifting ownership of most large corporations, is it even possible to talk of 'British business' in the same way we could in years gone by? Isn't there a fundamental antagonism in advocating economic freedom and the free movement of capital yet seeking to restrict the free movement of workers across borders? Ultimately, it seems, UKIP wants to have its cake and eat it. It wants to retain the best bits of the market economy while discarding what it

considers the negative outcomes of 21st-century neoliberalism. UKIP's economic policies are, of course, deemed relatively unimportant because it joins the larger political parties of Westminster in accepting absolutely the core principles of market economies. Of far more interest to the voting public is UKIP's cultural message, some of which is out there in the open, and some of which is hidden and implied. This crucial distinction reflects a deeper and more fundamental schism that has appeared in the political realm: on the one hand, the unchallengeable supremacy of the free market, and on the other, a shift towards rather basic, two-dimensional 'cultural' relations as the principal sphere of social antagonism.

EIGHT

Conclusion: Why the left must begin from the beginning again

In this book we have spent some considerable time addressing the transformation of the mainstream political left. For us it is clear that the rise of the right in the 21st century is inextricably connected to the decline of the left as a serious political force.

Since the 1970s the left has stumbled from defeat to defeat to defeat. Today's relentless conservative and liberal media attacks on Jeremy Corbyn's new opposition, salvo after salvo fired out of every position across the spectrum, from *The Sun* to *The Guardian*, threaten the left's fragile revival among the young. Today, more young people feel empathy with those suffering on the margins because, in neoliberalism's insecure economy, they can sense that there is a genuine chance they might join them there. The economic insecurity long experienced by the old industrial proletariat is spreading throughout the social body. Many young people will start their careers in insecure and poorly paid service sector jobs. Even for graduates this is true. And with the passage of time, fewer young people are progressing into more secure and better paid work. The labour markets they hoped to enter have been exposed to job insecurity. There is little left that can be relied on. Perennial insecurity is now perfectly normal. Unless the left can engage the people in a meaningful discussion about how these stark problems can be addressed, and how the economy might be reorganised with a view to making it work for the majority of citizens, it is staring yet another defeat in the face. A yet more destructive era of neoliberal pragmatism will begin. Asset stripping will continue and hard-won entitlements will be withdrawn. All of modernity's partial achievements

will begin to break apart and crumble into the dust of history. Anger will continue to grow, and things will become tougher and tougher for ordinary men and women across the country.

The neoliberal right has achieved total ideological domination of the field of political economy, and the power and influence of reactionary right-wing populism is growing day by the day. For the most part, the left has withdrawn from the lifeworlds of the working class, and it no longer wages war to improve the lifestyles and security of the proletariat at the expense of those who have amassed staggering wealth as a result of ongoing economic restructuring. A variety of attempts are currently underway to reconnect with those in the west who suffer most from the tyranny of markets. But, unfortunately, those engaged in this process are marginal to the mainstream democratic left's current political project, and continue to be cast into the wilderness by the mass media's relentless demonisation.

The left lost interest in the traditional fight to effect genuine change on the field of political economy, and instead opened up new theatres of conflict on the field of culture. Generally speaking, the left accepted the capitalist horizon. Instead of attempting to restrain capitalism's tendency towards socially destructive profit-seeking, the left set about the ceaseless task of attempting to disperse rights a little more evenly within the system as it stands. The left's current activity on the field of culture and identity politics covers up a deeper inactivity. It has abandoned the field of political economy almost entirely, the field on which we must focus if true progress is to be made. Old slogans about 'changing the world without taking power' now seem quite ridiculous, and serve only to assure the neoliberal power bloc that the left is now entirely domesticated, and remind those trapped in the margins that it is too weak and divided to function on their behalf.

We do not deny that the radical liberalism of the 1960s pushed the left in new and interesting directions, but each one of these directions took the left further and further away from the working class. Let's be clear about this: the left's abandonment of the fundamental commitment to class struggle – and its gradual drift towards divisive identity politics – has been an utter disaster. And it has been an utter disaster for all of us.

The liberalisation of the left, and its consequences

As we have tried to show, what the left needs now isn't a project that stops at the point of encouraging all to respect diversity or tolerate difference. Our job as academics is not to scan the horizon in the hope of identifying some new micro community that deserves our sympathy. Philanthropy is not enough. At this point in our history we need something more forceful. We need to overcome the deadlock of contemporary politics, and we need to construct and popularise a vision of a future socioeconomic system in which all are included in both participation and outcomes by right, and in which the obscene divisions and injustices of contemporary neoliberalism are completely absent. The first step is to ditch our obsession with personal freedom and reassert our commitment to the common good.

Those who argue that cultural intolerance must be positioned at the core of the left's political agenda cover up with their beautiful, multicoloured liberal cloak a fundamental and very ugly class antagonism that must now be exposed and discussed. We have grown used to talking about toleration, but rarely now do we talk about exploitation, and we never talk about systemic exploitation at all. This should strike us as odd. Our economic system continues to rest on exploitation. It is not as if we can say that we have successfully overcome exploitation, and the only task that now lies in front of the left is the cultivation of a more tolerant cultural order.

Many on the liberal left express sympathy for the poor, and many are committed to providing the poor with better welfare services. However, some of this group display a marked distaste for the working class as a whole and what they perceive to be the conservatism and intolerance that demean their cultures. The poor are welcomed to the liberal left's ongoing political project, but only on the condition that they ditch for good any vestigial class and cultural commitments they may carry with them. Everyone on the left today must be tolerant and liberal. Those who aren't tolerant and liberal are the enemy, even if they are in desperate need of assistance and political representation, and form part of a social group that has been systematically exploited by our economic system for centuries.

Our contacts often appeared to sense the liberal left's thinly veiled fear and loathing of the disreputable white working class, and it infuriated them enormously. What are we to make of this situation, where the left line up against those elements of the working class whose reactionary bile is reproduced and intensified by the left's unwillingness to fight on the field of political economy? Why do the left's representatives in Parliament steadfastly refuse to even talk about class? Why is there not a leftist commitment to the interests of the working class as such, in all of its real-world diversity? This commitment is unlikely to arise among an institutional old left that believes we are all middle class now, or a cultural new left that sees class as only one relation – and in many cases, the least important – in the intersectional matrix.

The liberalisation of the left, and the dominance of the middle class within it, played a direct and significant role in our contacts' adoption of right-wing nationalism, creating it anew, or persuading them by means of its cowardly withdrawal from political economy to renew their subscription to reactionary ideas that still hang in the air. They hated the contemporary left's weird, destructive and effete counter-culturalism, and could discern no connection whatsoever between the left and England's proletarian class. They believed that they were viewed by the left as vulgar barbarians, and it was clear to them that the left was totally disinterested in the significant and very real problems they faced. This contempt created not simply a 'self-fulfilling prophecy', but a means by which the liberalised left vicariously fulfilled someone else's prophecy on their behalf – namely, the conservative right. We should recognise that this destructive relational sentiment is not new – self-proclaimed 'socialist' Lady Shaw once revealed that she would be happy for the working class to run the country as long as she wouldn't have to invite any of them round for tea.

The liberalised middle-class left, supporters of the EDL believed, had become the principal enemy of the English working class. The left cared far more about immigrants and people with different sexual proclivities than it did about its own manual class, the class of people who emptied their bins, delivered their pizzas, serviced their cars and fixed their boilers,

the class of people who had been the nation's factory and cannon fodder throughout history. For us, the left today needs to be returned to the working class. Its key representatives should be members of the working class. It is the working class that must win the fight for social and economic justice. Middle-class liberals cannot and will not win it on their behalf.

When our contacts spoke about the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party, they did not speak of the return of genuine choice at election time. They did not compare social democracy to liberal democracy, and they did not talk about the pros and cons associated with the state taking a more active role in the formal economy. They did not even attempt to calculate which of the main political parties would best represent their economic interests. There were no expansive conversations about nationalisation or the implications of a new governmental commitment to tax wealth to a greater extent. These were everyday men and women in insecure and often demeaning work with pressing practical commitments and concerns. They were not intellectuals and did not aspire to be so. The truth is that they saw Jeremy Corbyn as a do-gooding, weak-as-piss hippy pacifist. They did not see a leader with the potential to upset the existing order of things. They saw only continuity in Corbyn, the continuity of a system that undervalued them and people like them, and the continuity of a long-running process of gradual decline. They saw someone who cared more about the welfare of migrants than about the old proletariat, and they hated him. What does this hatred of Jeremy Corbyn tell us? To suggest that these men are simply atavistic Neanderthals incapable of identifying an obvious truth tells us nothing and avoids the central issue. Something much more important is going on here, and it is something the left needs to pay attention to in the years ahead.

The Blair and Brown years were an absolute disaster for the left. The cultural new left had long been written off as generally useless, unelectable and in many ways actively counter-productive to their interests. But during these years it became progressively easier for members of the working class to see that even the institutional left that named itself as the party of labour had little interest in protecting and advancing their interests. The

decades of deindustrialisation and mass immigration impacted on the lives of the white working class in ways that the middle-class liberals who had taken control of the Labour Party fail to acknowledge or appreciate. Labour's staunch advocacy of multiculturalism and high levels of immigration, combined with its inability to reverse deindustrialisation and return tenured labour and economic security to working-class regions, encouraged many in the white working class to feel that they were on the bottom of everyone's list. As New Labour pressed on with its plan to reinvigorate the party and make it appealing to an electorate concerned mostly about income growth and standards of living, it became increasingly difficult to see any representatives from the working class operating in important positions in the Westminster bubble.

What we see here is not simply the reduction of the Labour Party's political capital in areas dominated by the white working class. Rather, Labour's problem became the left's problem. The anger was such that it was applied indiscriminately, and the entirety of the left was tarnished in the eyes of a significant number of white working-class men and women. The rise of right-wing populism in those areas most affected by deindustrialisation is not simply a random contingency thrown up by the movement of history and reproduced by existing 'narratives' and 'discourses' that can be 'subverted' and remade in the ethereal realm of symbols. These two processes are closely connected and firmly grounded in the real and harmful consequences of neoliberalism's politically driven tectonic shift in the global economy.

We have tried throughout the book to communicate the sense of sadness and anger that exists in England's white working-class neighbourhoods. There we found little to suggest that progress might be just a little further along the road. It pained us greatly to see these proletarians marching under the flag of fascism. However, when our contacts told us that they had been abandoned and could see no vocal advocate to speak for them on the field of politics, we were forced to agree. In their various ways our contacts seemed to know that in recent years politics had taken a profound middle-class liberal turn, and that people like them had to adapt to this new reality or die out. They were

unable to adapt, and they did not want to die out. Instead they kicked out at those they believed had caused their suffering and those who threatened to eradicate the last vestiges of their culture and community. This is the uncomfortable reality the left must now be bold enough to face up to.

The rise of the right

Throughout Europe right-wing populism has grown to the extent that we can now legitimately begin to think about the very real possibility of a fascist future. The new right-wing nationalism will not be a carbon copy of 20th-century European fascism, but fascism it will be, nonetheless. For years this seemed unthinkable. It seemed that we were together becoming increasingly liberal and tolerant of difference in a social democratic continuum that would guide us all into a bright future. The triumph of western liberalism has ensured the return of its own opposite. These two – fascism and liberalism – are bound together. Each actively assists the other to evolve within and across distinct historical contexts. Liberalism's ostensible victory on the fields of culture, politics and economics has fomented the growth of opposition groups fully committed to the dismissal of liberalism's shallow freedoms and the retrieval of supposedly authentic traditions, cultures and ways of life. Groups like the EDL appear quite marginal at the moment, but nationalist parties have already taken power elsewhere in Europe, and nationalist movements are growing all the time.

We should expect this process to continue. Climate change will inevitably lead to growing numbers of people making their way to parts of the world less damaged by the ecological transformation. Around the equator, in the Tropical Convergence Zone where whole agricultural systems are being destroyed by long periods of drought punctuated by huge random flash floods, it is becoming harder and harder to sustain life. State governance is breaking down and violence is rising (Parenti, 2011). Huge numbers of people are moving north – and in the process, abandoning their cultures and traditions – in the hope that they might find something better for themselves and their children. Many more have been displaced by wars and incessant

cultural and political conflict (UNHCR, 2015). And where do they hope to go? Where would you hope to go? The spectacle of western affluence inevitably draws the attention of those forced to leave their homes behind, and as millions migrate across land and sea in the hope of finally arriving at a destination that promises to put an end to their suffering, a destination that promises peace, stability, employment, welfare and order, those who already live precarious lives in the west's deindustrialised zones begin to worry. And their worries grow. Increased inward migration will drive the formation of Europe's new nationalist movements at an even faster pace. That much is clear. The EDL appears to be splintering and shrinking slightly, and UKIP are not advancing at quite the rate one might have predicted, but the Conservative and Labour parties appear to have got the message that the people want an end to inward migration. And what of the new populist nationalist movements in Germany, in France, across Scandinavia and the Benelux countries, and throughout much of Eastern Europe?

How can the left begin to work through these problems? Ultimately, it needs to shed its skin and become something else entirely. We must recognise that the adoption of hippy counter-culturalism was a colossal error, and then begin to repair some of the damage it has caused. The first step is to reconnect with the working class with a renewed order of grounded universal ethics and truthful symbolism comprehensible to all cultural groups. We must dispense with the liberal-postmodernist dictum that there is no privileged truth and each cellular cultural group is entitled to generate its own – the EDL's beliefs ride on the back of this principle – and renew a multipolar dialectic grounded in socioeconomic reality. Culture must not be abandoned but put back in its sub-dominant place, and on the field of politics the multicultural must become the transcultural. The broad working class exist at the epicentre of this reality, and remain absolutely integral to progressive politics. We must use our educational institutions to inform the working class truthfully of the forces that created their present difficulties and of the future that lies ahead. We must do this in such a way that allows the working class to re-educate and re-politicise itself from the position it has experienced and can readily comprehend, and then we

must place the renewed politics of the working class at the very core of the left. We must do all we can to jolt the people out of their cynicism and resignation. We must fight to redirect the anger of the people towards the true cause of their insecurity and suffering.

In the midst of such intellectual dynamism the left can be rehabilitated. Reconnecting with the working class and persuading them to believe in its project is a very difficult task, but it can be done. Preventing right-wing populism from advancing still further also seems very difficult. We have already passed key climate tipping points (Barnosky and Hardly, 2016), resource wars are being fought around the globe (Klare, 2001), and large corporations and global superpowers are planning for a bleak future in which climate change and mass migration prompt the collapse of national economies and threaten the continuity of civil society (Parenti, 2011). Perhaps the pessimists are correct. Perhaps we will need to pass through a powerful historic shock before things can change. Or perhaps we can rediscover the power of belief and a dogged determination to join with others to prevent the disaster that awaits us just a little further along the road.

“An unapologetically bleak account of contemporary Britain, cutting angrily and incisively through the thickets of liberal dogma. Essential reading.”

Mark Carrigan, Digital Fellow, *The Sociological Review*

“In their brilliantly-researched work, the authors show what a disaster the ‘mainstream’ left’s embrace of liberalism has been for traditional working-class communities.”

Neil Clark, journalist

“A fast moving novel take on how New Labour and the liberal left media created the circumstances in which the English Defence League would grow and of how UKIP and the EDL are linked.”

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Steve Redhead, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia

This book aims to alter thinking about working-class politics and the rise of the right-wing nationalism in the de-industrialised and decaying towns and cities of England.

The rise of the right among the working class, as shown in the shock Brexit result, is inextricably connected to the withdrawal of the political left from traditional working-class communities and the left's refusal to advance the economic interests of those who have suffered the most from neoliberal economic restructuring.

Incisive, contentious and boundary-breaking, it uses the voices of men and women who now support far-right political groups, like the English Defence League, to address the total failure of mainstream parliamentary politics and the rising tide of frustration, resentment and anger.

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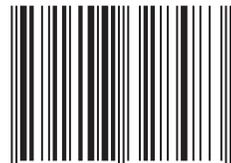
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