

The Emptiness of British Politics: Loss, Melancholia, Hauntings

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Current British intellectual discourse committed to a left politics seems to be obsessed with loss and the concept of hauntology. Melancholia appears as the prevalent affect. It seems that the political moment can only be meaningfully grasped in the figure of the spectre. In this political column, Mark Schmitt (Dortmund) reviews a number of recent publications which seem to point towards an emptiness in current British politics that can be traced to issues of class and national identity.

Whose Fish?

Jacob Rees-Mogg gushing over Britain getting its fish back might be a good place to start when thinking about the emptiness of British politics. In January 2021, after Brexit was completed, when asked about the fishing disaster and whether Scotland's fishing industry would be compensated

for it, Rees-Mogg evaded the issue by arguing that what's important was that Britain got its fish back and that they're now "British fish" and "better and happier for it". Rees-Mogg, who might be a bizarrely comedic figure but is not necessarily known for his intentionally comedic talents, apparently meant this to be a joke, but then again, you can never be too sure about that. What his remark does show, though, is a desperate desire to localise British politics. As Solvejg Nitzke has pointed out, fish do not get issued passports and won't bother about anthropocentric and speciest obsessions with human national belonging (2021).

So, Rees-Mogg's statement is less about the belonging of the fish, but about "having" the fish. And, what is more, it is about British citizens' belonging. Rees-Moog's claim on fish is more about the empty signifiers of Britishness, and thereby, British politics

itself have become empty. British politics is so empty that its noncontent must be vaguely localised in the sea, in nonhuman species who don't care about arbitrary human-made political and ideological borders. The maritime farce is reflective of a wider sense of emptiness, loss and longing in British politics that has also occupied the contemporary left. While Paul Gilroy already diagnosed a "postcolonial melancholia" (2006) that found its expression in a right-wing clinging to long-lost past ideals of Empire and nationhood quite some time ago (and his diagnosis is still very much valid today), we can now see the left in the grip of a special kind of melancholia. This melancholia is more wide-ranging and complex.

An Island of Loss

If the publisher Repeater Books is any indication for current trends in left intellectualism, the left is in a constant state of political and cultural mourning. Melancholia is the affect of the times. In *New Model Island*, Alex Niven addresses the "nostalgia for a country that no longer exists" (2019, 7). The British islands are an "archipelago of loss" (14) and England, its supposed ideological centre, in a "sullen, soulless state of unbeing" (21). No wonder it needs to claim the fish! Niven proposes a radical regionalisation of England which at the same time avoids

unionism and nationalism. Building on Tom Nairn's classic argument about the break-up of Britain, Niven opts for the break-up of England – an antidote to England's political emptiness. As radical and future-oriented (he calls it a "sci-fi conjecture" at one point, cf. 126). The underlying thesis of Niven's argument is that current Anglo-British nationalism centres on the melancholic attachment to a void.

Tommy Sisson pursues a similar argument with regard to Anglo-British masculine working-class identities. The systematic erosion of working-class communities and subsequent "liquidity imposed on class by neoliberalism" has led to a withering of class-based identity that has led to a "distinctively masculine, regressively nostalgic and nativist vision of the country, [...] an act of desperately grasping at nationality in order to fill the void of an unconscious mourning of class consciousness and identity" (2021, 5). The resulting "Small Man's England" is equally emptied of actual substance. While, again, Sisson starts with the diagnosis of a melancholia and nostalgia, that is, an unhealthy attachment to something long lost, as the cause of right-wing sentiments, it is indirectly, again, the diagnosis of a long-lost content of left-wing politics as well. For what is there to do for the left if one of its main aims, the forging and enactment of a working-class

consciousness that will form the basis for a socialist politics, can no longer be grounded due to the lack of a coherent working-class sense of community and consciousness?

Class and Melancholia

The resulting “melancholia of class” (a phrase recently proposed by Cynthia Cruz and yet another recent Repeater title) is a particularly difficult sense of loss and mourning: a mourning of something that is not precisely lost, but *officially considered* to be lost: the working-class person knows full well that class still exists, that not everyone is “middle-class” now, nor that they’re living in a “classless society”. The lived reality of class exists in stark contrast to the official discourse of class, and this is what might account for the melancholic relationship to class. Much like Englishness, which is, as Niven argues, experienced as a “condition of loss” (Niven 2019, 25), class is experienced as a paradoxical void. Perhaps it is because of this chasm between the lived material reality of class and the symbolic sphere of class that we’re currently seeing a surge in publications which address the working-class experience in the genre of autoethnography. A couple of contemporary writers have turned to Richard Hoggart’s seminal urtext of British cultural studies, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class*

Life (1957) as a model for their own approach to convey autobiographical experience of and academic research on working-class life today.

In Britain, Lynsey Hanley’s *Estates: An Intimate History* (2007) and *Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide* (2017) are representative of this trend, while in France, Didier Eribon’s *Returning to Reims (Retours à Reims, 2009/2018)* and *La société comme verdict* (2013), demonstrate a similar move towards using personal experience of growing up in the working class, but transitioning into the middle class through academic education. Cynthia Cruz, who writes about her experience in the American context, describes the “specter of what the middle class imagine as ‘working class’” as her “double”, her “working-class self, the ghost of who I left behind when I left my home town, now hidden behind a palimpsest of tropes the middle class invented” (2021, 1-2).

Hanley, Eribon and Cruz might originate from different national and cultural contexts, but they share the same sensibility when it comes to working through the mental bruises and internal conflict resulting from crossing the class divide and facing the challenge to reconcile different class-based identities. It is here that the emptiness and loss of class can be located. This sense of loss and

melancholia is exacerbated by the fact that traditionally socialist parties like Labour no longer offer a politics based on a coherent shared working-class identity. This is where Sisson identifies the danger of losing working-class voters to the lure of right-wing parties which fill the void with a sense of identity. Dead, empty signifiers trail behind all of these concepts. It is no wonder, then, that the concept of hauntology is ubiquitous in recent political writings.

Is Everything Haunted?

Many of the writers discussed here are companions or students of Mark Fisher, who co-founded Repeater Books in 2014. Fisher's use of hauntology, based on his reading

of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, has proven fruitful for these writers. Everything seems haunted and ghosts of the past and the future are omnipresent: the spectres of class, hauntings of nationalism, the "spectres of revolt" (cf. Gilman-Opalsky 2016), the spectres of the late Mark Fisher himself (see Matt Colquhoun's *Egress: On Mourning, Melancholy and Mark Fisher*, 2020). So, is everything haunted? I recently attended a conference in Cornwall where a speaker proposed that even Keir Starmer might be an embodied haunting, reflecting the deadness of current Labour politics.

While one might cynically suspect the concept of hauntology to be a trend that risks becoming a cliché, it might still be worth



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contemplating why left-wing thinkers in Britain and beyond feel compelled to express their ideas in terms of mourning and hauntings. Is it self-pitying, overindulgence in pretentious theorising? Is it the intellectual fashion of the day, as empty as the phenomena it tries to describe with fancy terminology? Does it testify to a lack of new, vital ideas for an alternative left politics? Is left thinking condemned to working through the debris of the past rather than looking towards the future? Has British politics finally become its own Gothic novel?

If instead taken seriously on its own terms, the current preoccupation with hauntings and loss can point towards melancholia as a dominant political affect or, in Raymond Williams' term, a structure of feeling. It is a means to come to terms with a pervading sense of cognitive dissonance and alienation stemming from the experiences of social class and national (un)belonging that is reflected in the emptiness of a politics that needs to resort to fish as the carriers of political meaning. In that context, it is also worth noting that in the wake of Mark Fisher's seminal books *Capitalist Realism* and *Ghosts of My Life*, depression as an individual mental condition as well as a collective symptom of neoliberal culture has increasingly been politicised. Perhaps this is most accurately reflected in the

recent Sleaford Mods song "Mork n Mindy" and accompanying music video directed by Ben Wheatley which shows the band and featured singer Billy Nomates haunting the deserted rooms of a council estate flat, playing with abandoned toys and staring out the windows like ghosts, sometimes accompanied by their own uncanny doubles which appear behind them in the frame. Jason Williamson's lyrics underline the melancholic and hauntological aspects: "I live in a really depressing cul de sac / Where couples get divorced / And people come up that you'd never seen before". Billy Nomates seconds this: "The state of it is alarming, so don't presume anything / Or blue Monday will someday become you." In the video and song, the council house becomes a haunted house that embodies the melancholia of class. Like autoethnographic writings on the experience of working-class life, the song and video thus become a means to culturally reinscribe oneself in the cultural and political imaginary of Britain and to replace emptiness with new meanings.

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