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The Return of Politics

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Please address any enquiries to
Hard Times Magazine
Prof Dr Dirk Wiemann
Department of English and American Studies
University of Potsdam
Am Neuen Palais 10
14469 Potsdam
Germany

or
hardtimesinfo@uni-potsdam.de

Layout by
Stephanie Jürries

Photo on front cover by
[Andrey Kuzmin](#)

i	Editorial - The Return of Politics <i>Dirk Wiemann and Anke Bartels</i>
1	Corbyn, Populism and Power <i>Luke Martell</i>
12	Populism in the Social Sciences <i>Sebastian Berg</i>
15	“...saying what was previously unthinkable”: for an Egalitarian Version of Populism <i>An Interview with Yannis Stravarakakis by Dirk Wiemann</i>
24	“In order to be utopian, you have to feel utopian” <i>Two perspectives on the recent strike at UK universities</i> <i>Christin Hoene and Lena Wänggren</i>
31	Resilience or Fuck You Neoliberalism <i>A strike poem</i> <i>Grace Krause</i>
37	“Britain First” or White Privilege Reloaded? <i>Brexit on Screen and Stage</i> <i>Anke Bartels</i>
48	Who Can We Laugh At? <i>British Humour in Times of Brexit</i> <i>Aileen Behrendt</i>
58	Fiction in Dark Times: the Brexit Novel and Ali Smith <i>Harald Pittel</i>
68	Make English Sweet Again! <i>Refugee Tales, or How Politics Comes Back to Literature</i> <i>Dirk Wiemann</i>

EDITORIAL

The Return of Politics

In his 2016 book-length analysis of the ‘Corbyn phenomenon’, political commentator and blogger Richard Seymour interprets Corbyn’s election as Labour Party leader as symptomatic of the “strange rebirth of radical politics”. The second, revised edition of the book, breathlessly penned to the moment after Labour’s impressive turnout in the 2017 general elections, emphasises the idea of a leftist revival even more: from “a tea-towel memory of better days, a nostalgic, left-behind hangover”, left-wing working-class politics resurfaced in a “fizz of angry exuberance” that “celebrated an abrupt widening of the horizons of the thinkable” (Seymour 2017, xxxi). What Seymour suggests here – namely that we are witnessing (or better: taking part in) a *return* of politics – seems to get seconded and find its especially pronounced expression in the area of cultural production. Whether in literature, theatre and dance, pop music, film, the museum circuit or the fine arts: the cultural field is bristling with anger and discontent over austerity measures, neo-nationalism, right-wing populism, Brexit, rampant xenophobia, you name it. And while many celebrate the current penchant for critical commitment in the arts, others complain about the

alleged instrumentalisation of culture for crudely political causes. Thus, novelist and critic Tim Parks diagnoses (and overtly bemoans) “the intensifying politicization of the literary world” (Parks 2017, n.p.) as writers, especially after Brexit and Trump, assume again for themselves the role of unacknowledged legislators. Parks’ exasperation at this development may remind one of Tony Blair’s incredulous “bafflement” with Corbyn’s unlikely victory over the Labour grandees. While Blair and his confederates flinched at the prospect of Labour becoming a “party of permanent protest” (Seymour 2016, 1) – read: a political party, again –, Parks similarly admonishes his politicized colleagues whom he perceives to mistake literature for activism. For them, Parks alleges, “simply putting pen to paper is already an act of courage and a bid for freedom”.

Parks’ impatience with such “juvenile” antics seems to indicate that the good old days of committed style are back again indeed. And do we not in fact witness the comeback of the social-realist condition-of-England novel (its most recent avatar being the ‘Brexit novel’)? Even more pointedly, Alex Clark recently proclaimed the “return of the protest

novel” (Clark 2017, n.p.). The trend to literary neo-commitment seems to have infected even such apparently playful and ‘irresponsible’ authors as Will Self, who describes his latest work, *Phone* (2018),

May’s notorious ‘hostile environment’ policy, or the ongoing demolition of the last remnants of the NHS ...
... themes that figure prominently, too,



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as the first English novel to seriously assault the “collective amnesia” around the UK’s involvement in the Iraq War and the concomitant national guilt. For Self, his book is primarily an intervention into the immediate present, where “the refusal to engage with [the hushed-up recent past] is playing out in political decisions that are being made right now” (qu. in Clark 2018, n.p.): fatefully wrong decisions all, whether Brexit, Theresa

in the adjacent field of pop music, that other cultural domain where the return of politics is clearly visible. Here the return is signalled by a revamped neo-post-punk diction that effectively does away with the last residues of the affirmative retro-chic – the Beatles, Kinks or glam rock references – that characterised the ‘Britpop’ of the Blair period. By contrast, current acts like Cabbage, The Idles or PWR BTTM go back to the raw energy

and simplicity of 1970s punk: a musical style that is congenial to the stark anger expressed in their lyrics. In songs like “Uber Capitalist Death Trade” or “The Road to Wigan Pier”, Cabbage rage against austerity, Tory callousness and chauvinism. Meanwhile, some of The Idles songs sound like Didier Eribon rendered punk music: in “Divide & Conquer”, the disembowelment of the NHS poignantly boils down to the blistering slogan-like line, “A loved one perished at the hand of the barren-hearted right”; and the ultra-angry “Mother” opens with the screaming out of how “My mother worked fifteen hours five days a week / My mother worked sixteen hours six days a week / My mother worked seventeen hours seven days a week”, followed by some practical recommendations about “the best way to scare a Tory”. No wonder that commentators have repeatedly diagnosed “the return of protest pop” (Beaumont 2017), and that even the German *tageszeitung* have regained some faith in Britain’s indie scene.

The return of politics?

If ‘culture’ is a seismograph that registers what is going on, then the return of politics must surely be in the air. Yet to speak of a ‘return’ may be misleading, as it suggests a comeback, as if politics had at some point in time moved elsewhere or even fully disappeared, and now

returned. Of course this is not really true: politics has never vanished. What is true, however, that its relevance or even existence have been denied. Not too long ago, especially in the global north societies seemed to have entered a condition that many leading political theorists criticized as ‘post-political’: in this perspective, proper politics consists of the struggle between different interest groups over distribution and representation, whereas by contrast post-politics assumes a deep consensus within society and reduces politics to mere administration. Blair’s New Labour and their ‘Third Way’ doctrine are as symptomatic for this dominant trend as the “*Neue Mitte*” rhetoric of the Schroeder cabinets in Germany, not to mention the stoic and “systematic refusal of politics” so typical of most periods of Merkel’s chancellorship. Differences between major political parties got blurred (very much to the detriment of Social Democracy all over Europe) and parliamentary democracy got eroded to a procedural rather than a political process. Extra-parliamentary social movements whose pressure politics had traditionally addressed and influenced certain representatives within parliament tended to get delinked from major decision-making processes and lost much of their energy in a climate of general depoliticization. The status quo of the neoliberal post-Cold-War world order appeared eternal, and the ‘there-is-

no-alternative' mantra served to entrench the limits of the political imagination.

Needless to say, the stasis of this post-political leaden time was never real. Post-politics was not a reality but an ideological programme: a more or less successful attempt to make politics appear obsolete and discredit it as 'populism' (of which more later). Meanwhile, all over the world political movements and struggles continued and gained in intensity, giving the lie to the post-political ideology. "Another world is possible" – the slogan of the world social forum movement – succinctly captured the claim to reopen the space of politics as a contest of alternative

tangible as, all through the early 2000s, one Latin American country after the other adopted some version of Chavez's 'Bolivarian Revolution'. A little later, the 'Arab Spring' shook many parts of Africa's Mediterranean rim and urged democratic reforms, just like the Gezi Park protesters in Turkey claimed more democratic participation, too. But also in the metropolitan centres of the global north politics proper raised its head again and 'returned' with a vengeance after the near-meltdown of capitalism in the wake of the Lehmann Brothers bankruptcy and the subsequent politics to bail out 'too-big-to-fail' banks at the expense of the majority of people. The 'Occupy' movement brought questions



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modes of shaping the social world. The possibility of another, alternative world order beyond the paradigms of neoliberal globalization became more

of equitable redistribution and justice to the fore and re-asserted that which post-political ideology had tried to conceal: the divisiveness of society. The

slogan, “we are the 99%”, pointedly emphasised that the actual dividing line runs not between genders, sexes, ethnic or religious groups, but classes. Within Europe, this renewed mobilization around issues of economic redistribution found its most critical expression in those countries that were most severely affected by the implementation of draconian austerity measures in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis: Spain, Portugal and especially Greece, where for a few months in early 2015 an actual alternative appeared to take shape at the level of state government.

From today’s perspective, these moments of political mobilization in the name of redistributive democracy appear to belong to another time altogether. For the past three years or so a massive rollback on a global scale has set in: the pro-democracy movements in the Arab world, in Turkey and elsewhere have been crushed with the help of newly enthroned authoritarian and autocratic regimes. Meanwhile in Europe, the movements towards a more equitable and solidary architecture of the EU have effectively been bullied away by a new rampant nationalism. The success of the ‘leave’ campaign in Britain is as symptomatic of this as the coming into power of a range of right-wing parties in such countries as Poland, Hungary, Austria and Italy, among others. Much of this neo-nationalism thrives on

demagogic scaremongering, especially around the phantom problem of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’. This has led to the enforcement of border policing, to the thorough militarization of the Mediterranean, to the criminalization of refugees, to the illegal deportation of asylum seekers with pending cases, and, most recently, the legal persecution of activists involved in humanitarian rescue missions off the Libyan coast. All this, of course, is *also* politics: a reactionary politics whose function it is to contain the emancipatory impulses enumerated above. In short, if politics has returned it has not returned in the form expected or desired by the critics of the post-political consensus.

The return of politics!

No doubt progressive politics is on the retreat at this moment, but it should not be denied that all the various movements of the past fifteen years or so have had at least one major and important effect: namely, to undo the faith in the neoliberal worldview and the ‘no alternative’ doctrine. Post-politics is over. The containment of progressive politics can no longer be organized through stoic administration but through forms of government that appear themselves as political. The rise of the anti-democratic if not fully autocratic right, therefore, is an indicator of the fading out of the post-political version of governance.

Instead of an ideology of consensus and business as usual, the rhetoric of these new regimes from the USA to India, from Turkey to the Visegrád states within the EU is essentially populist. It assumes a permanent conflict between ‘the people’ and its others, which may be embodied in ‘the elite’/‘the establishment’ but also in ‘the foreigner’. For good reason, stiff disapproval of this version of populist mobilization, especially of the demagoguery and bigotry of ‘post-truth’ and ‘alternative facts’ politics, is widespread on the left. On the other hand, a full dismissal of ‘populism’ as such appears counterproductive because it runs the risk of leading back to a full refusal of politics as such. Populism hinges on the assumption that the social space is divided into two camps, and it functions “as a flexible mode of persuasion to redefine the people and their adversaries” (Panizza 2005, 9). In that sense it is the absolute opposite of post-politics. It is divisive to the core, and may thus be specifically prone to serve for a politics of divide and rule. But then again, all social movements that have contributed to the betterment of society have always sprung from the insight that a fissure is running through society and that, accordingly, antagonism and conflict are part and parcel of any form of self-assertion of the underprivileged. The working-class movement, feminism, anti-colonialism, Black Power or the various LGBTQ movements have all been populist then:

they all have constituted themselves in struggles for rights and entitlements, and by the very same token, in struggles *against* the status quo and its defenders. In this understanding, populism and politics cannot be held apart. For “if populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice at the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative.” (Laclau 2005, 47).

Given this, it is precisely the difference between the Trump, Orbán or Farage varieties of populism on the one hand, and a populist politics from the left that becomes crucially important. Obviously enough there is a substantial difference, and it consists in the very different ways in which ‘the people and their adversaries’ are getting redefined. Right-wing populists attempt to restrict ‘the people’ to a homogeneous national or ethnic identity, excluding immigrants, refugees, and any Other definable as “foreign”, and to mobilize ‘the people’ for projects that aim to consolidate and stabilize established corporate powers and conservative ideologies; left-wing populisms, by contrast, try to involve people in struggles for emancipatory aims not foreseen by the established order. As Chantal Mouffe plainly puts it: right-wing populism today is against migrants and for the political



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and economic forces of neoliberalism; left-wing populism is for migrants and against the political and economic forces of neoliberalism (Mouffe 2015). In analytic terms it may not be accurate to speak of *'the return of politics'* since, as we have seen, politics had never withered away. In strategic terms, however, it is crucial *what* politics will return. After post-politics, it is of the essence for all further perspectives *which* of the contending political outlooks will gain the upper hand. Culture, we hold, has a role to play in this clash of ideologies.

The return of politics

This issue of *Hard Times* is titled *The Return of Politics*. A couple of contributions expressly focus on the question of populism and its relevance

for the left on its hard road to renewal. **Luke Martell** analyses one of the more amazing and promising developments in this field, namely the 'populist' recalibration of the Labour Party after Jeremy Corbyn's election to leadership and especially after the unexpectedly positive turnout in the last general election while **Sebastian Berg** offers a brief overview of the general conceptual dimensions of the term 'populism', Leading political theorist **Yannis Stavrakakis** shares some of his thoughts about the aversion against populism and what it is that distinguishes progressive from reactionary populism.

Politics is of course not exhausted with theoretical and analytic descriptions but needs to be tested and further developed in concrete interventionist

practice. In this issue of *Hard Times*, we touch upon only one instance that may, however, exemplify something like the return of politics in action: **Christin Hoehne** and **Lena Wånggren** report the university strike that hit some 65 campuses all over the United Kingdom and put teaching to a halt for a period of more than two weeks. Since academia is a sphere that has for a long time been exposed almost defencelessly to the assaults of neoliberal subsumption, the faculty strike is an important enough event – not least because it has reopened debates about the social role and political responsibility of academic and scientific research and teaching, as strike activist **Grace Krause** pointedly expresses in her poem ‘Resilience’ that we are happy to include in this issue.

The sense of immediacy that speaks through Krause’s text is conspicuous for some of the more significant developments in contemporary drama, as **Anke Bartels** delineates in her article on two productions that address Brexit head-on: *My Country – A Work in Progress* by Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris constellates documentary interview extracts with Duffy’s own poetic interludes, while *Brexit Shorts* consists of nine short monologues written by nine playwrights commissioned by *The Guardian*. Both productions are highly critical of the Leave campaign and the outcome of the referendum, and

they register the deep disillusionment and simultaneous desire for change that characterize pre-Brexit Britain.

While committed theatre has found its own ways of addressing the problems of contemporary British society, political satire seems to have fallen on hard luck in times of Brexit and Trump, as some observers like Hugo Rifkind or Emma Burnell claim: laughing at the establishment does no longer challenge but actually empowers the likes of Boris Johnson or Nigel Farage enacting a politics in the name of some ‘anti-establishment’ populism. As **Aileen Behrendt** diagnoses in her discussion of current political satire in Britain, there is a danger that Brexit and its aftermath foster the return of a politics of humour that mistakes racism, sexism, misogyny and homophobia for fun.

In the first part of this introduction we have hinted at the ways in which a newly re-politicized literary scene is involved and invested in the return of politics. **Harald Pittel** offers a reading of Ali Smith’s ‘Brexit novels’, *Autumn* and *Winter*, that he reads as not only elaborate critiques of a society more and more obsessed with homogeneity, “compartmentalization and privatization” but moreover attempts to reassert the intense pleasures of endorsing the divergent, diverse and impure. Smith’s advocacy, in her

novels, of a non-insular, worldly vision of Britain corresponds with her active engagement as a prominent ‘patron’ of the “Refugee Tales” project, which **Dirk Wiemann** portrays in his contribution to this issue: a joint venture of refugee relief activists, writers, actors, and academics, “Refugee Tales” is an annual public walk-and-talk performance against the politics of indefinite detention of asylum seekers. Re-enacting Chaucer’s pilgrimage, the project is a unique attempt to overwrite the ‘hostile environment’ that Britain has become at the hands of Theresa May and her ilk, and reclaim the land for a more humane and convivial politics of hospitality.

Of course, this *Hard Times* volume cannot touch upon, let alone do justice to, all the manifold ways in which the return of politics manifests itself. At best, this issue can selectively mark some of the more obvious and perhaps sustainable trends. In the upcoming volumes, *Hard Times* will continue to probe into the state of the art of the political by focusing, in volume 102, on the question of gender and sexual politics today, and in volume 103 on the situation of the political left on an international scale. We are looking forward very much to these forthcoming volumes and hope that the contributions contained in this issue may help trigger some discussion and some productive controversy over the return of politics.

A final remark: this is the first *Hard Times* issue to be launched from the journal’s new base camp at Potsdam University. We are happy to act as hosts and we hope that our new guest will be a long-term resident, and that he/she/it will have many visits from old and (hopefully) new friends. You will have noticed while reading that you have not been holding a print version of *Hard Times* in your hands. The reason is simple: there isn’t one any more. For the times they are a-changin’, including the hard ones. Less philosophically put: *Hard Times* must pay its tribute to the hard times we are going through these days and from now on restrict itself to the disembodied spectral form of an online journal – for reasons both ecological and economic (as we all know: the determining factor in that last and lonely instance that never comes ...).

As always, something’s lost where something’s gained and vice versa. *What is lost:* the allure of the traditional *Hard Times* so dear to many of us; on a more practical note, the portability of a hardcopy that you could leisurely browse in the park or on the bus, or show to your friends and colleagues. *What is gained:* the versatility of the digital that allows for the possibility to have, occasionally, short-notice mini-issues; the indisputable charm of an open-access publication that for the conceivable future will be

available for free (good news, therefore, for all the patient subscribers out there!) *Decide for yourselves* which way the scales go for you: pro or con the new version? In the latter case, there is still hope since we are trying to organize an affordable print-on-demand service for everyone who feels they cannot do without the materiality, the rustle and aroma of the good old *Hard Times*. In case you are determined to hold a paper version of this or any later issue of *Hard Times* in your hands, don't hesitate to contact us at hardtimesinfo@uni-potsdam.de

Dirk Wiemann and Anke Bartels
(University of Potsdam)

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Corbyn, Populism and Power

Luke Martell

(University of Sussex)

Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party in 2015 with wide member support but opposed by most of the party's parliamentary elite. In late 2016, his team, wary of a possible election and with the party lagging in the polls, decided on a populist approach, inspired by Trump's no-nonsense anti-elitism. Corbyn was never one of the establishment, through his career a serial rebel against the party leadership and was seen as having an honest 'unpolished authenticity' (Bulman 2016, Stewart and Elgot 2016). He was allowed to be himself, perceived to be close enough to the people for this to find resonance with them. In the 2017 election campaign he spoke at large rallies and moved with ease amongst ordinary people, in contrast to the Tory leader who was said to be robotic in interviews and was kept away from the public. He used the slogans of 'straight talking honest politics' when standing for the party leadership, and 'for the many not the few' at the general election. The latter is from Labour pre-

Corbyn, but has a populist content to it, for all of society, not just the core working class, and against the elite. Corbyn had a phase of using Trump-ist terminology about the system being 'rigged'. For many he has seemed a man of the people, speaking directly to them, close to and for them, despite the opposition of political, media and corporate elites; a British part of a global populist surge in politics, left versions in Southern European parties like Syriza and Podemos, Sanders in the USA and the Latin American left. At the 2017 election, Corbyn's Labour won an unexpectedly large vote, across classes, with strong support from the young.

March (2017a, 2017b) argues, however, that there is little populism in mainstream British politics, beyond politicians being people-centric and claiming to be close to the people; as much electoralism as populism. Mainstream political populism, he says, is 'fleeting, vague and tokenistic' and not populist in the true sense of being anti-

elitist and favouring popular sovereignty: 'seeing Corbyn as populist is, at best, a half-truth' (March 2017a). However, the glass is half full as well as half empty and there are populist dimensions to Corbyn's policies, although some of it leftism creating populism as much as populism behind his leftism.

There can be populism at several levels. Corbyn's advisors were drawing on a perception that he is close to the people; a populism *of* the people.

used definition is of being *for* the people against the elites. A stronger and narrower definition is as for popular sovereignty and popular democracy, a *by* the people populism. Economic populism is about being for the people against the elite in terms of material redistribution and egalitarianism. Populism is sometimes defined in terms of nationalism, against outsiders and exclusionary. Finally, there is populism by aim or achievement, intention or accident. Someone can achieve it without intending to.



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There is a politics of being popular *with* the people, with cross-class rather than sectional support, across divides and plural identities rather than based on a specific group. A simple and widely

Populism in the party

Ed Miliband resigned as Labour leader after the 2015 election. In the ensuing leadership contest Corbyn took his turn to be the candidate of the left.

Everyone expected him to finish a distant fourth in a field of four. Leadership elections had changed, after Miliband, from an electoral college of unions, members and MPs to one member one vote, shifting power from MPs to the grassroots. However, Labour leadership candidates required nominations from 15% of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and Corbyn only secured enough because non-supporters proposed him to ensure a broad field of candidates. He attracted great support from the rank and file desperate for an alternative to austerity and to the neoliberalism and austerity-lite of Labour since the 1990s. Corbyn's personal appeal played a part. Many joined the party to vote for him. When he won, more signed up inspired by the direction he was taking the party. Corbyn achieved 60% of the vote, the next candidate 19%. He came first across all categories of members, registered supporters and affiliated members. Most of the PLP opposed him and once he was elected many would not serve in his shadow cabinet. Labour had voted in a leader more left-wing than its PLP and closer to the membership than the parliamentary party. There were echoes of populism and anti-elitism; a leader going beyond elites and based in the people.

Corbyn's early days as leader were met with hostile opposition from the PLP and snide and mocking coverage by the media. Tory Prime

Minister David Cameron derided his dress sense and perseverance in persisting as leader despite the onslaught he was under. But Corbyn, surrounded by solidaristic supporters and with the backing of the party membership, resisted pressure to resign. In 2016 a leadership challenge was made by Owen Smith. As incumbent, Corbyn no longer needed the minimum PLP nominations, which he would have failed to obtain this time. He won with 61% of the vote. Smith received a lower proportion of support than the three losing candidates combined in 2015. Corbyn had bypassed the media and PLP elites again and once more gained endorsement straight from party members.

The party has grown phenomenally since Corbyn stood for and became leader, with 570,000 members at the end of 2017, compared to 200,000 when he became leader, 405,000 at the peak under Blair, and 150,000 for the Conservative Party (Perry 2017, Waugh 2017). Corbyn brought many into the party: the young who had been alienated by anodyne Labour beforehand, excited by a genuine anti-austerity alternative; Old Labour supporters who had left the party or grown disillusioned and inactive; even Marxists and socialists who saw a radical leader and hope for the social democratic parliamentary road they had previously dismissed.

Since Corbyn took the helm party reforms have increased the power of members, with more representatives on the National Executive Committee and a decrease in PLP nominations needed by contenders for the leadership, reducing the elite veto. A party review has investigated how to further expand members' power in policy making. Proposals include more representation on party bodies, again reducing the role of the PLP in nominating leadership contestants, and the mandatory reselection, and so possible deselection, of parliamentary candidates. Political compromises have led to changes in these directions, if not all the way in each case. The review aims to challenge the boundaries between party and movement. What may have seemed utopian, and raising contradictions between party and movement, now looks, in the context of change in the party, plausible and coherent.

So, in the party Corbyn is popular with the people, for them and on popular sovereignty grounds could be said to be populist. His place within Labour and proposed reforms fit, to an extent, with of-, with-, for- and by-populisms. But spreading democracy to party members favours the left so it may be politics leading to populism as much as populism being the driving force. And how populist Corbyn is, is affected by whether populism *in* the

party becomes populism *of* it; whether popular support for the leader in the party translates into the same across society electorally, and party democratisation extends in government to popular democracy in society as a whole.

Populism in support: of and with the people?

In 2017, Prime Minister May calculated she could increase her majority against a party with a left-wing leader under siege and called an election. But Corbyn won much greater support than expected. Labour's share of the vote rose from 30% in 2015 to 40%, compared to the Tories' 42%, and Labour gained an additional 30 seats in parliament.

Where did Corbyn's support lie (see Curtis 2017)? His, and that for May, was cross-class, popular rather than class-based and sectional. He won especially significant support amongst the young and expanding ranks of the more highly educated. This dropped amongst the older and those without degrees who supported the Tories more strongly. This group will shrink as the educated young grow older and take their place. A key issue is whether the backing of the young educated for Corbynism is lifecycle, so they become more right-wing as they get older, or generational and a sign of a lasting left anti-austerity cohort, in which case the Corbynite proportion of the population will grow over time. Corbyn

can mobilise the liberal-left educated middle class, especially the younger members of this strata and public-sector workers, although his acceptance of Brexit could risk alienating a mostly pro-Remain group. It is not clear if he has support from the insecure precariat, a cross-class group, but they seem likely to be open to his anti-austerity politics more than Labour's prior submission to neoliberalism, and Labour was well ahead amongst the unemployed in the election.



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With the private sector aspirational working class and less educated middle class, materialistically oriented and sometimes self-employed, Corbyn may have a problem where Blairism has

more appeal. The question is whether this is enough to lose Labour elections.

Post-election surveys did not show strong support amongst Labour voters for Corbyn as 'Prime Minister material' but suggested belief in his policies (Barasi 2017). Bringing anti-austerity and redistributive politics back into mainstream political discourse has involved hegemonic leadership by Corbyn, finding points of contact between the material reality of people's lives and his ideas and mobilising people behind them, something Thatcher was also skilled at.

So, Corbyn can be seen as populist in being of and with a cross-section of the population, not predominantly a particular class. But while he did well in the general election and won broad support, some groups do not support him in large numbers and he did not win. The Tories were returned to office and also received wide backing, so Corbyn has no greater claim to popular support than them. Furthermore, is cross-class support, or seeking it, which all politicians want, populism or just electoralism? Being of the people, understanding their concerns, expressing them and winning their support, may not be populism, or just thin populism. Being for the people against the elites or democratic empowerment of the people, by-the-people politics, are more clearly in the category of populism.

Populism in society: for and by the people?

Corbyn attacks elites and argues for the people on economic grounds, criticising tax evasion and the top few's riches. The 2017 manifesto proposes the highest 5% earners pay more income tax, everyone else to give no more. The middle classes are not targeted for extra income tax, beneficiaries of redistribution to be the broad mass not just the working class, giving a populist as much as a class basis to Labour's egalitarian approach. Labour propose greater popular power in the economy: doubling the size of the co-operative sector, giving employees first right of refusal if their companies go up for sale, for local and community forms of non-profit public ownership in the energy and water sectors, and widening trade union representation in workplaces. The party proposes nationalisation of rail and the Royal Mail. A party report suggests further expansion of municipal and local social ownership, and democratised national state ownership. In the public sector, Labour intend to expand local participation in NHS planning, reverse health service privatisation, and re-insource public services. They say they will increase community involvement in local government planning and fan participation in sports governance. Labour advocate a more representative make-up in decision making across

policy areas, as well as within the party, and lowering of the voting age to 16 (Labour Party 2017a, 2017b).

The party propose a constitutional convention on extending democracy nationally, regionally and locally. The policy forum developing their next manifesto takes submissions from any members of the public. It is consulting on devolving power to local communities, how to facilitate participation and democratic accountability in them, extending democratic ownership in the economy and accountability of educational institutions to parents, children and the community. Corbyn has argued for public involvement in local budget decisions, referenda on public service outsourcing, greater trade union bargaining rights, and staff representation on executive remuneration committees. He proposes more online democracy, citizens' assemblies, and replacement of the House of Lords with elected representation; contrasting proposals for bottom-up democracy with monopolisation of power in the 'closed circles' of central government, the heights of the civil service and corporate boards (Smith 2016).

Corbyn's politics are *of, for* and *with* the people in economic egalitarian anti-elitism. There are *by* the people elements in the economic bases for participation that redistribution can facilitate. Economic egalitarian

populism may have political power populism effects. Party policies involve shifting power to the public sector for and on behalf of the people away from private interests and economic elites. They propose a more democratic economy, greater direct popular

Corbyn's Labour say funds should be diverted to areas where public services are affected by immigration (Labour Party 2017a: 28-9), seemingly endorsing discourses that immigration causes social problems. However, while he has said that Brexit will end free



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participation in the workplace and public-sector planning, and devolution of power closer to the people in localities politically (see Guinan and O'Neill 2018). There are populisms of, for, and on behalf of the people against the elites and by the people in these policies.

Nationalist and economic populism

Populism has been defined as about nationalism and exclusionary. Corbyn is primarily focused on the UK and the interests of people in Britain. But the 2017 manifesto contains internationalism in the tradition of the Labour left (Labour Party 2017a: ch. 12). And Corbyn is not nationalist especially. He does not promote Britishness as an identity, and his politics are not ethnically exclusive like right-wing populism.

movement he also states this does not pre-determine a Labour government limiting it (Kuenssberg 2017). One of Miliband's 5 election pledges in 2015 was 'controls on immigration'. Corbyn's manifesto, though, makes a clear rhetorical differentiation from anti-immigration sentiment. There is a strongly worded disavowal of scapegoating and blaming migrants for problems they did not cause and for valuing their contribution to the UK (Labour Party 2017a: 28-9). Corbyn argues, like Miliband, that problems ascribed to immigration, such as the undercutting of pay and conditions, are labour market issues, requiring employment protections rather than immigration controls.

Corbyn accepts Brexit, exiting the single market and is against a second

referendum on a completed Brexit deal. But Brexit was won in a referendum and his acceptance is for democratic rather than nationalist reasons. His history of Euroscepticism is about opportunities for a left government outside a neoliberal EU, not xenophobia. In his departure from nationalism and racism there are clear differences between right-wing populism and Corbyn's politics. He campaigned for Remain, although perhaps for political as much as conviction reasons, and has marked his position off from the Conservatives' by advocating continuing British membership of the Customs Union.

It can be argued that nationalist-populism is not populist as it divides ordinary people as much as unites them, whereas economic populism is about a unified popular mass against a small wealthy elite. It less divides the many amongst themselves, more the many against the few. Corbyn's left-populism is economic and about economic equality and redistribution, against rich elites, and for greater economic inclusion, justice and rights for most of the people. Left economic populism has a more socio-economic focus than the socio-cultural nationalist right concerned with identity and is more inclusive and pluralist than the cultural and exclusive nationalist-populism of the right.

But left and right populism do not differ because the left one is socio-

economic and right-wing populism is cultural. There is a neoliberal populism that is socio-economic and stresses individualism and property rights; taking power from the state and public sector and giving it to people through private ownership and market choice. The left departs from this by having a collectivist and redistributive concept of empowerment. For politicians like Corbyn, the state not the market, and government not capital, are for the people. So, Corbyn's populism differs from the far right's nationalism by its socio-economic and inclusive approach but also from neoliberal right populism by different conceptions of socio-economic justice and rights for the people and the means to these.

The horseshoe model that sees left and right as curving close in their radical reaches does not work here. The economic egalitarianism and social democracy of Corbyn is far away from the ethno-nationalism of the radical right and the economics of neoliberal populism. Economic egalitarianism creates the populism in his politics. It is ideology that makes his populism; not populism that makes his politics.

Left, right, populism and power

Corbyn is a democratic socialist but his policies are social democratic, for political as much as ideological reasons, for egalitarian and socialist institutions

within capitalism. Labour's policies for rail nationalisation do not require the

But Corbyn is radical measured against neo-liberal austerity-lite



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expropriation of private property, just non-renewal of contracts for companies running train services. 60% of the population support rail nationalisation and state train operations are common in countries like Germany and France where rail travel is superior. A majority support nationalisation in areas like water, the Royal Mail and energy (Smith 2017). A proposed National Investment Bank has featured in past Labour policies and other countries. Quantitative easing for the people echoes Keynesianism, once accepted across the political spectrum. Abolishing £9000 student fees sounds radical. But 20 years ago there was free university education throughout the UK as there is in countries like Scotland, Germany and Denmark.

Labour of the '90s onwards and after 30 years of neoliberalism as the paradigm for politics in the UK. And alongside for- and on-behalf-of the people policies that shift power from private interests to the public sector, are potentially radical by-the-people proposals for a mass movement-based rather than elite-led Labour Party, and greater economic democracy and popular participation in the running of public services. At the same time, it is leftism and egalitarianism that make this populism as much as populism constructing Corbyn's ideology. Categories of left and right tell us as much about Corbyn as those of elitism and populism.

Britain has been under the political and ideological spell of neoliberalism since 1979. Political discourse shifted to the right such that market principles became a norm for public policy decisions, as well as for the private sector, and the burden of proof came to lie with those who want to use collective provision and planning rather than private sector delivery and the market. This was a path set by Thatcher but further established by Blair, who ruled out alternatives in his politics of political caution and the market. Labour vacated alternative ground. There have been no mainstream political forces across the UK to oppose this and take another way. Advocating alternatives has been left with social movements, pressure groups, Green and small left parties and academics. But rather than trying to compete with the Tories on their own grounds, Corbyn has brought collective provision, economic equality, and social democracy back into mainstream politics. He has reintroduced as normal the role of the state for the people, and concerns for the people less focused on individual achievement and more on collective effort and the poor. Instead of accepting dominant discourses of austerity, Corbyn has mobilised support for an alternative to austerity and moved it from marginal to mainstream.

Corbyn's leadership has been endorsed by party members against Labour's

parliamentary elite and won cross-class support in the 2017 general election. His policies match with egalitarianism rather than individualism in the electorate. It remains to be seen whether this of-, with- and for-the-people populism will extend to an electoral majority. If it does Corbyn's programme will challenge political, media and corporate elites of the UK. He proposes economic egalitarianism alongside the beginnings of a populist reconstruction of power towards the people within and beyond his party. There will be a fightback by those with power and Corbyn may need to appeal to the people in and beyond the party and to extra-parliamentary forces in his defence. In the face of elite attacks, his economic populism may rely on an expansion of his political populism that gives power to the people.

I am very grateful to Sebastian Berg for his helpful advice on this article.

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Populism in the Social Sciences

Sebastian Berg

(Ruhr-University Bochum)

As a concept, 'populism' has had an impressive academic career over the last couple of decades. Nevertheless, it is an 'essentially contested concept' (Cas Mudde¹), meaning one whose usefulness as an analytical tool is still questioned. Geographically, populism is more often used to describe political phenomena in Europe and the Americas than in other parts of the world, mainly for historical reasons: these are the regions, where the term populism once was used by political actors to describe their own position – without any negative connotations being implied. Examples of self-described populists are

- the Russian *Narodniki*, urban revolutionary intellectuals who went 'into the people' (in particular to the peasants) in the hope of radicalising them and creating a revolutionary movement in the 1870s (a movement that spectacularly and tragically failed);
- *Boulangism* in late 19th-century France, a movement named after the

general and politician Boulanger, who wanted to replace the Third Republic's parliamentary system with a plebiscitary, grassroots-democracy republicanism;

- the USA's *People's Party* in the 1890s, a movement aiming at a combination of economic protectionism and social egalitarianism;
- and a variety of parties and movements representing the poorer sections of society and challenging the predominantly white postcolonial elites in 20th century Latin America.

Populism thus initially stood for rather diverse reformist and revolutionary movements and organisations fighting political 'elites', socio-economic inequality and political oppression at the level of the nation state, the dominant arena of late 19th- and 20th-century politics. Recently, however, the label has been transformed by the media and academic commentariat into a relatively empty signifier that lumps together all those groups seen as critics

of really-existing democracies while aiming at a different way of involving 'the people' in politics. Consequently, a two-pronged dichotomy, beside the left-right and libertarian-authoritarian axes, is gaining in importance in mainstream political analysis: populism versus elitism, and, because of populism's allegedly homogenised and essentialised notion of 'the people', populism versus pluralism.

The fashionable academic interest in populism has produced, among other things, an *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (2017), which suggests three approaches to the populism phenomenon:

- The first and most widespread of these understands populism as an ideology.² The core of this ideology consists of the division of the polity into the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elites'. Populism stands for a programme of reintroducing the people's 'common sense' as a standard by which political decisions ought to abide. Because populism is a 'thin' ideology, it frequently uses 'host' ideologies, which define the people either socially (as a class) or ethnically (as a nation). Hence it becomes possible to identify both Trump and Sanders (or Gauland and Wagenknecht, or Farage and Galloway) as populists. Nuanced writers on populism, like the late Norberto Bobbio, distinguish an exclusionary right-wing from an inclusionary left-wing populism.
- The second approach sees populism as a form of identification and organisation – a top-down relationship between a leader and a movement based less on ideology than on personal identification with, and willing subordination to, the leader. S/he usually secures her/his following by referring to a common enemy/threat whose defeat requires loyalty. Hence, both Le Pen and Mélenchon are seen as populists even if they try to convince 'the people' of different kinds of threats (immigration versus globalisation). According to this approach, populism is, first of all, a strategy to gain political power. Once in power, populist leaders are not unlikely to rely ever more on authoritarian measures and less on persuasion – in this context scholars refer to examples like Hugo Chavez.
- The third approach defines populism as a way of political communication aimed at people's 'lower instincts'. Here, populism acts as a provocation for established 'high' ways of speaking about, and doing, politics. Whereas 'high' stands for a well-behaved, restrained, polite, disciplined, cosmopolitan, formalist register of political communication, 'low' stands for a coarse, emotional, personalist and nationalist one. Michelle Obama's statement 'when they go low, we go high' neatly summarises this distinction. The dichotomy is not

restricted to speech in a narrow sense but extends to accent, gestures, the challenging of taboos, etc. In political practice, the distinction is replicated in an emphasis on proceeding according to the rulebook ('high') or on 'getting things done', even if this involves violating checks and balances ('low'). Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump are the most salient representatives of this distinction in recent years. However, they also exemplify its problem: the apparent integrity of the 'high' way might be more appearance (based on the habitus expected in the political field) than substance, which contributes to the destabilisation of this position in times of political crisis.

To me, the problem with all three approaches seems to be that they share a normative bias: they see really-existing democracy, from an idealistic perspective, as the best of all forms of government and, formally, as static. If democracy has been, is, and will be perfect, then all challenges to the constitutional and practical status quo (whether ideological, strategic, or stylistic) are necessarily threats. From a realist and materialist perspective, however, democracy may be seen as an arena in which different actors challenge each other and struggle for power and influence – employing strategies that conform to certain legal requirements and procedures, like general elections, and others that are ethically

and legally dubious, like lobbying, as well as downright illegal ones, like money-for-favour arrangements. From this perspective, populism is not necessarily a danger. Consequently, for students of politics and democracy, it becomes more important to focus on the specific politics of populism (which can be inclusionary, egalitarian, anti-discriminatory, etc. or quite the opposite) than on the populism of politics.

Thanks to Luke Martell for conversations on this topic.

Notes

1 Mudde, Cas (2017). "Populism: An Ideational Approach". The Oxford Handbook of Populism. Ed. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy. DOI: 10.1093/oxford-hb/9780198803560.013.1

2 Ideology is, by the representatives of this view, understood to be a false belief that serves the political interests of those concerned. There are, of course, many other definitions of ideology.

“...saying what was previously unthinkable”: for an egalitarian version of populism

An Interview with Yannis Stavrakakis

Yannis Stavrakakis, Professor of Political Science at Aristotle University Thessaloniki, is a prominent representative of the ‘Essex School’ of political discourse analysis and a leading theorist of political populism. He has published extensively on populist politics and is currently writing a monograph entitled Populism, Anti-populism and Crisis.

Many thanks to Yannis Stavrakakis for agreeing to give an interview for this issue of Hard Times.



“...saying what was previously unthinkable”:

Hard Times (HT): *In your work you have repeatedly warned against a demonization of populism and criticized an ‘irresponsible’ anti-populism. This is somewhat counter-intuitive in a climate where populism is mainly associated with hard right-wing demagoguery and xenophobia. Could you explain what you mean when you advocate a responsible and democratic populism?*

Yannis Stavrakakis (YS): It sounds counter-intuitive precisely because of a widespread and largely biased eurocentric identification of populism with the extreme or radical right. This uncritical identification has dominated both academic and public debates in Europe and is wholly

misplaced, leading to serious misconceptions and misunderstandings and creating conceptual confusion. Because it is usually a euphemism to label the radical right ‘populist’; it is also something that they are often happy to accept since it ‘absolves’ them from far worse designations and makes them appear more ‘likeable’. For example, if a neo-nazi is denounced as ‘populist’, he/she is likely to celebrate and cherish this naming, precisely because he/she is given a politically softer and less damaging label. In most of these cases, a peripheral reference to ‘the people’ and ‘popular sovereignty’ is referred back to a nationalist or racist signification, ‘the people’ is reduced to ‘the nation’ or

to ‘race’ and the central



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antagonism marking social and political space is conceived in terms of a horizontal frontier (in/out) modeled along nationalist lines. Indeed, such discourses and movements can be very distant from the global populist canon, from what both a diachronic and a synchronic analysis of international populism(s) reveals. From a historical-genealogical perspective going back to the Russian and American populism(s) of the late 19th century, one realizes that most populist phenomena belong to the left and exhibit a rather egalitarian, 'inclusionary' profile: 'the people' remains an 'empty signifier' able to accommodate and include all the excluded, impoverished and non-privileged sectors of a population (including immigrants) and the central antagonism posited is articulated along vertical lines (bottom/up or top/down): the excluded 'people' vs. the establishment, the elite, the 1%. Debates around populism can greatly benefit from avoiding this eurocentrism and from embracing a genealogical and truly comparative perspective registering the different variants of populism, from rigorously registering and distinguishing what

is predominantly populist and what is not. Besides, political forces like PODEMOS and SYRIZA, born out of the recent European sovereign debt and financial crisis, exhibit precisely such characteristics and re-establish the importance of this egalitarian populist version within contemporary Europe itself, thus effecting a paradigm shift of sorts. If this is the case, then one also has to accept that populism in its inclusionary form can be a corrective to a democracy that has lost its egalitarian, participatory component, does not serve 'popular' but rather 'market sovereignty' and seems to follow a post-democratic direction. All those popular strata resisting this oligarchic course are bound to utilize the emancipatory political grammar of democratic modernity and attempt to articulate their different demands in a unified and thus stronger political subject; this is how 'the people' is discursively and performatively created, a process involving two crucial strategies: (1) people-centrism, a central reference to 'the people'; (2) anti-elitism, an antagonistic understanding of politics in polarized terms, pitting the people against the

power bloc. Under conditions of an increasingly violent neoliberalism (or worse ordoliberalism), inclusionary and egalitarian populism may be the only viable way to resist this trend. This is why it is often demonized in mainstream anti-populist discourses. Obviously this left-wing populism needs to be cultivated and educated in order to avoid excesses and limitations, in order to incorporate a self-critical and reflexive tone.

HT: *In the past ten years or so we have witnessed (and to some extent participated in) many movements that appeared to indicate ‘the return of the people’ – from the Arab Spring to the Gezi Park protests, from Occupy to Podemos and Syriza. Not very much seems to be left from the energies of these movements, while right-wing and authoritarian politics are gaining ground everywhere. What happened to the energies of street and square politics? Is left populism dead?*

YS: The process you describe involves at least two separate moments, let’s call them a ‘pre-populist’ moment and a

proper ‘populist’ moment or stage: movements like the Greek and Spanish ‘indignados’, like Occupy or some movements associated with the so-called Arab Spring, etc. represent a rather loose assertion of heterogeneous demands voiced by different strata and by discrete social sectors and political agents against a common enemy: the establishment, the ruling elite. What follows is a hegemonic intervention that unifies these demands and assumes the task of centrally representing them in the national political sphere: it is here that the horizontalism of social movements and autonomous initiatives, of the ‘multitude’, mutates into the verticalism of political parties like SYRIZA and PODEMOS.

Our recent historical experience demonstrates a twin danger leading to political impotence: when horizontalism fails to transform into a more vertical axis, then social mobilization is bound to eventually die down; this is what happened, more or less, with Occupy. On the other hand, if horizontal mobilization is wholly absorbed by a vertical party representation, then the radical axis can be more easily lost with this party



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form being ultimately incorporated into existing power structures. Radical democratic politics may involve retaining both of them in some sort of dynamic, productive tension.

Ernesto Laclau has formulated it in a very cogent manner:

the horizontal dimension of autonomy will be incapable, left to itself, of bringing about long-term historical change if it is not complemented by the vertical dimension of ‘hegemony’ – that is, a radical transformation of the state. Autonomy left to itself leads, sooner or later, to the exhaustion and the dispersion of the movements of protest. But hegemony not accompanied by mass action at the level of civil society leads to a bureaucratism that

will be easily colonized by the corporative power of the forces of the status quo. To advance both in the directions of autonomy and hegemony is the real challenge to those who aim for a democratic future [...].¹

If or when these two moments are combined then left populism arguably stands a better chance to successfully question and confront a very organized neoliberal camp that operates effectively on a transnational institutional level within the EU and the Eurozone and internationally. In the Greek case, this did not materialize and the left-wing populism of SYRIZA quickly felt the violent institutional pressure of the EU and other international institutions, but also the limitations of the

Greek electorate that insisted on an ultimately untenable and impossible position: yes to the EU and the euro (seen not only as a currency, but also as a clear sign of European identity and acceptance from the crypto-colonial European gaze), but no to austerity. In this sense, SYRIZA failed to change the course of Europe, but more or less stayed loyal to a rather contradictory crypto-colonial Greek popular sentiment. Nevertheless, even when these forces fail to counteract neoliberal hegemony, they often manage to change the functioning of party systems and media debates. For example, even if Occupy Wall Street failed to transform into a political agent able to effect large-scale change, it did manage to function as an agenda-setting mechanism putting forward ‘inequality’ as a central topic of concern.

HT: *In the British context, populism is mostly associated with Ukip and the anti-EU propagandists who succeeded in gaining the majority in the Brexit referendum. In principle, a referendum is surely a democratic means to express the people’s will. And still most of us*

would agree that, unlike in Greece in July 2015, something went terribly wrong in Britain. Does this not confirm the conservative’s wariness of a ‘populist revolution’ that, as The Economist prophesies, will ultimately replace orderly parliamentary sovereignty with the rule of the mob?

YS: The mob is neither a concept I use nor a concept I accept, because it tends to downgrade a priori popular participation in decision-making processes. I am not sure something went terribly wrong anywhere, and this has nothing to do with particular outcomes: we cannot judge a certain institution (in this case, referenda) on the basis of whether we like the result of a particular vote or not. Ultimately, everything boils down to whether one opts for an elitist theory of democracy, which restricts popular participation to periodic voting, suspects and sets restrictions to popular participation, or whether one opts for a radical democratic position that enhances popular participation and passionate commitment in all levels of political life. The overall trend today is in favour of the elitist

camp either in its plutocratic or its technocratic guise or both, and, what is worse, when resistances mount and get invested in egalitarian, inclusionary types of populism they

death. She writes that, “the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party has brought me hope that things could be different in Britain. And the recent announcement that Corbyn



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get discredited and violently crushed, leaving only a xenophobic radical right to camouflage and sell itself as the only alternative political force in town.

HT: *In an interview with The Guardian (29. 12. 2016), Chantal Mouffe speculates that the Labour Party might turn out to be an exception to the rule which seems to condemn social democracy to*

is going to adopt a left-populist approach indicates that he has understood that this is the only way to renew radical politics.” A good year and a pretty successful snap election later, would you say that Mouffe’s optimism has proven well grounded?

YS: I do think Chantal has a point here! Social democracy has been so neoliberalized

that it often does not realize the mortal danger it faces: what you call ‘death’, its reduction to insignificance in many European and global party systems, what goes by the Greek-inspired name pasokification. PASOK, which was a strong centre-left populist party polling nearly 50% in the 1980s, is now reduced, as an incarnation of the so-called ‘extreme centre’, to almost 6-7% of the vote. Corbyn seems to represent an exception to this rule within the European context. His platform seems largely populist, clearly pitting ‘the many’ against ‘the few’, thus managing to change the terms of public debate, bypassing an extremely hostile media system, inspiring the grassroots and starting to change the tide of British politics. This is certainly a very interesting case to follow.

HT: *For your analysis of left democratic populism you have developed a very specific definition of the term ‘charisma’. I am thinking of your idea of the ‘charismatic bond’ between the electorate (with their numerous grievances) and the political agent – party and/or individual – that publicly voices the hidden,*

unsayable demands of that electorate. Could Corbyn and his Labour Party perform such a ‘charismatic act’, too?

YS: This is a discursive understanding of ‘charisma’, which does not draw so much on Max Weber, but rather utilizes the very challenging work of the social and political anthropologist, James Scott. In this perspective, every social setting, every power structure, involves the operation of both what Scott calls a ‘public transcript’ and a ‘hidden transcript’. The public transcript reproduces established hierarchies and power relations and regulates accordingly social interaction(s). When, however, something goes wrong and ‘business as usual’ cannot go on – when, for example, a crisis interrupts the smooth functioning of the system –, then it may happen that someone will voice publicly a grievance or a demand that, up to that time, was only whispered in private. The person who voices this, for the first time publicly, is invested with a certain aura, a certain charisma. This is how, during Syriza’s first few months in power, Varoufakis and Tsipras enjoyed an amazing approval

rating in Greece without delivering any hard economic improvement: just on the basis of breaking the omerta that dominated the Eurogroup and the European public sphere (that Greece is a 'success story', that the Greek debt is sustainable, etc.). Something similar is happening today with Corbyn: saying what was previously unthinkable, as it breaks the previously established hegemony in Britain and beyond. As I already said, a crucial case to follow.

*Interview conducted by Dirk Wiemann
(Potsdam)*

Endnotes

1: Laclau, Ernesto, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, London: Verso, 2014, p. 9

“In order to be utopian, you have to feel utopian”

Two perspectives on the recent strike at UK universities

Christin Hoene and Lena Wånggren

Christin Hoene, University of Kent

At the beginning, the biggest strike action in the UK Higher Education sector was primarily about numbers. With 14 days of strike action at 65 universities across the UK, the protests against pension reforms this February and March marked the longest and biggest strike in the history of UK Higher Education. At the beginning, it was about money. More precisely, the strike was to protest employers' plans that would cut, by some estimates, up to £10,000 off the average academic's annual pension; which adds up to around £200,000 over the course of the average-length retirement. The employer, Universities UK (UUK), had proposed to change the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) from a defined benefit scheme, which guarantees retirement income, to a defined contribution scheme, which ties pensions to the fluctuations of the stock market. This was seen by many

academics and by the vast majority of members of the University and College Union (UCU) as an unacceptable threat to pension security. Hence, UCU called for the biggest strike action in its history.

But what started out as a strike about money and defined by numbers turned into so much more. As Jason Hickel put it in a blog post about the strike: “What we're really after is nothing short of reclaiming our universities from the banal and reductive logic of neoliberal capitalism - including the uberization of lecturers, the CEO-ification of managers, and the customerization of students. Because really, what's at stake here is the public university itself” (Hickel 2018).

So the strike turned from a focus on pensions to a much wider discussion about casualization, marketization, and the ever-increasing workload on academics' shoulders. It turned into a sounding board about the big questions, the biggest of them being: what kind of

university do we want? And that “we” included staff across the vast majority of the country’s universities, and within these universities, it included staff across all the different disciplines. And that “we” included students, which is something that the employers had not counted on. In their neoliberal conception of the university as a marketplace, where students are treated as consumers and staff are treated as content providers,

picket lines, voicing their grievances and complaining to management rather than their lecturers, voicing solidarity to their tutors, actively shaping the discussion about the current state and the possible future of education at teach-outs. There were more than 20 occupations of university buildings by students in solidarity with their lecturers. But, of course, students have their own numbers to bear: over the past 20 years, tuition rose



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UUK’s logic was that the students would demand the content that costs them in excess of £9,000 a year in fees alone and thus put pressure on staff who were, by taking strike action, withholding that content. The opposite happened. At universities across the country, students supported staff in large numbers and in various ways: joining staff on the

from the introductory £1,000 in 1998 to a staggering cap of currently £9,250 a year for UK and EU students studying in England, with the majority of the universities charging the full amount.

That “we” of the striking staff-student alliance did not, however, include me. Not because I thought the strike

action to be unjust or unjustified. To the contrary: I was and still am convinced that it was the appropriate reaction to increasingly inappropriate working conditions for academics, and I wholeheartedly supported my striking colleagues. I informed my students about the point and purpose of the strike, and I asked them to support it, by, for example, emailing the Vice Chancellor and joining the picket lines. Many of them did both. I donated money to our department's strike fund to help striking colleagues who are on hourly paid contracts and who struggle to make ends meet even under normal circumstances. I worked from home when I could so as not to cross the picket line. But I did not strike and I did not join the Union. I am on a temporary three-year contract, and I have a student loan to repay. To participate in the strike would have meant to dispense with half a month's pay and to not do any research for that same half month, when I only have 15 months of research time left on my current contract clock. So I could not afford to lose either, the money or the time. And that is another aspect of the neo-liberalisation and marketisation of higher education: striking becomes a privilege. Yet, many of my colleagues who, like me, could not afford to strike, did it anyway, and I admire their courage.

So what now? I asked colleagues who were on strike about their thoughts and experiences, and the consensus was that a lot of good came out of the strike: communication across faculties and departments, across staff and students. "Finally", one colleague wrote as a reply, "we talked about what is wrong with academia: the marketisation of education, tuition fees, pay cuts, precarious working conditions, the TEF, the fact that University management doesn't actually know what we do/how we teach and that their ideas of standardisation have nothing to do with reality. The fact that we ARE the university but 'they' run the university." Another colleague mentioned the strong sense of solidarity on the picket line, and how important it is to experience that you are not alone, particularly for people who are precariously "employed" and who do so much labour for the university, but who are so often unheard: "You look around and see that there are



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other people in the same predicament. That's really powerful." He said that the strike showed that another kind of University is possible; a university where lecturers are not content providers to students as consumers, but where it is about an exchange of knowledge; a university where what matters is the quality of education, and not new buildings. "In order to be utopian you have to feel utopian", he said. And I agree.

Lena Wänggren, University of Edinburgh

As a trade union representative, for me and many colleagues, engaging in industrial action is never "just" about money, or about numbers. It is about something much larger and with centuries or even millennia (as I learned at a strike teach-out on workers' revolt in Ancient Egypt) of shared histories of struggles. Trade union work, which includes many aspects – campaigning and negotiating on behalf of members to improve policies, pay, and working conditions; ensuring members' views are represented at HR panels; educating staff about their own rights at work and protecting these rights; representing individual members in meetings with management; and working with other trade unions and social justice groups to create a fairer society also outside of the workplace – is at its heart about collectivity. By taking industrial action, then, something which can include

both strike action and actions short of a strike (such as working to contract), we not only fight for a specific issue, but engage in a collective care for others that has a long history of struggle, sacrifice, and care for each other.

I think that this collectivity and sense of shared purpose and strength, which I have always found in trade union work and other labour organising, became available to many members first during the recent industrial action in UK universities (note that the strike did not affect all universities, but rather those universities which use the USS pension



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schemes – many universities in the UK belong to different schemes). Recent decades' marketisation of higher and further education in the UK (following on similar processes across Europe, large parts of North and South America, Australia) has brought not only increased tuition fees for students, but precarious working conditions, cultures of performativity and overwork, and damaging individualising neoliberal managerial techniques. Whatever we do is individualised and metricised, ranked and measured (an Australian colleague told me about a manager putting up rankings of individual staff members – based on their publications – available for all to see on the staff noticeboard). And the life outside of work is fast shrinking, with many academics expected to maintain 24/7 digital personas and spend their evenings, weekends, holidays doing work for the university.

Against these above described individualising discourses and managerial techniques, the 14 day strike action brought a solidarity and shared sense of purpose which many colleagues had not before experienced. And what many of us also shared, on picket lines, at teach-outs and rallies, was this: our own strength and power as workers. This new sense of strength and unity was also seen online, for example in the various blogs, poems, and art works spurred by the strike. One such

strike poem declares to the employer:

Fuck you for sending me invitations to stress reduction courses

While you make me teach larger classes for less money.

Fuck you for sending me booklets with breathing exercises

While my workload grows higher and higher
And fuck you, especially, for telling me to work on my resilience

While you try to dismantle the pension
That I can't even pay into yet

Because you prefer to give me four casual jobs, rather than one contracted one.

(Krause 2018)

There is strength in unity, and together we can change the way things work. We can resist the slow grinding down of academics and professional staff in our workplaces, which result in not only ill health (physical and mental) but in certain cases death.

For me as a precariously employed worker, in addition to as a union representative, it was particularly heartening to see so many precariously employed colleagues taking industrial action. The fact that so many hourly-paid, fixed-term, and otherwise casualised (as the UK term has it) staff had the strength and bravery to stand up to employers who do not invest in them and – for those on so-called zero hour contracts – can refuse to employ them the next day. For these

colleagues, taking action meant a larger sacrifice than for permanently employed colleagues. I had many long discussions with casualised colleagues before the



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strike, many of them worried about their financial circumstances. A 2015 survey of staff on insecure contracts carried out by UCU reveals significant numbers of precariously employed colleagues struggling to get by: 17 percent say that they struggle to pay for food, 34 percent that they struggle to pay rent or mortgage repayments, and 36 percent that they struggle to pay household bills like fuel, electricity, water and repairs. One respondent states: “I especially dread the summer and Easter periods as I have no idea how I will pay the rent”

(Hunt 2015). If one takes action, one strengthens the strike, and if one does not take action, one weakens it. But as these above figures show, many union members cannot afford to pay their rent even during non-strike periods. Realising the dire financial circumstances of precariously employed staff, UCU made the union strike fund available especially for this category of members.

However, for some members the delay in pay or reduced pay that the strike fund could not help with, and the lack of any safety net, meant some simply could not take strike action without risking not being able to feed their children, or being thrown out of their accommodation. While I would not agree with Christin above in her statement that striking is a privilege (I would rather say that it is a collective sacrifice which not everyone can make), it is easier to take strike action for some, and more difficult (sometimes impossible) for others. As someone invested in trade union work and in the wellbeing of my colleagues, I am not at all angry at my wonderful precariously employed colleagues or colleagues with caring responsibilities, who could perhaps take only one day of strike action, or two, or three, rather than the full 14 days, or who in some cases simply could not strike at all without risking their own or their families' health. I am filled with admiration and solidarity for those colleagues (and let us

not forget, precarity also includes those staff members on permanent contracts whose immigration status is threatened by taking action) who took action and stood next to me on the picket line, even if only for one day. I am however disappointed at the professors and senior academics who crossed picket lines, or who worked from home (which is also strike breaking), because they thought striking an inconvenience.

Taking part in collective industrial action is never easy. It is a sacrifice, done out of collegiality and care for the collective good. It means saying: I risk my employment, I potentially risk my career, I miss out on valuable research time, and I risk disappointing my students – but I do this alongside colleagues who make the sacrifice as I do, and we do it together and for the common good. This feeling of unity among colleagues has lasted, and will last, for much longer than the end of this recent strike. Considering the larger sense of purpose inextricably linked with trade union work, and industrial action, to my mind joining your local trade union, if you haven't already, must be a top priority. Some staff simply cannot join due to geopolitical constraints which make union membership difficult or (in some countries) illegal. But for the rest of us, this is the time. Is the union in your workplace too radical, or not radical enough? Does it have a history of excluding dissident voices, of racism or

sexism? Join it and change it. Do you agree with union principles, but have no time to attend union meetings? Join anyway, and be part of that collective which we represent and appeal to when negotiating with management on local and national levels. What is the alternative? If not now, when so many of us are at breaking point (or even past it), then when?

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Resilience or Fuck You Neoliberalism - a strike poem

Grace Krause

(University of Cardiff)



I should do a squat every day
My yoga teacher tells me
While I am perched awkwardly on my mat
Breathing through the pain
I'm not supposed to be feeling
Every day just do a squat
And a plank
And a downward facing dog.
It's just a little effort and you'll feel so much better.

I should meditate every day
The book tells me.
The book that tells me that I can cure my anxiety
If I just meditate everyday

And change my diet
And my exercise
And my life
Just 45 minutes every day.
It's just a little effort for my mental health.

I should draw a little every day
Because drawing relaxes me
So I need to keep doing it.
Do a little something I enjoy
Every day
And I'll love myself more.

Just these few things I should do every day
To take care of myself.
Do my breathing exercises
Walk 10.000 steps
Eat my five a day
Write in my journal
Practice my drawing
Water my tomatoes
Meditate for 45 minutes
Do a squat, a plank, a downwards facing dog

And if I just do these few small things
I'll be fine
I'll have been sufficiently kind to myself.
I can tick off all the items on the to-do list of my wellbeing.

And I thought about how few items I had ticked last year
Last year when the world was closing in on me
When the world wouldn't stop spinning
And fear spread through my body
Unstoppable
Unmanageable
When I sat at my desk shaking
Not knowing if I'd be able to get up again
I thought of all the things I could have done to take better care of myself

And how I would not have felt like this
If only I had
Meditated every day
Done my breathing exercises
Walked 10.000 steps
Watered my tomatoes
Written in my journal
Practiced my drawing
And done my squat, my plank, my downward facing dog.

And I knew that it was my fault I wasn't coping
And that if only I'd have done those few things I would have been able to handle it
all.

I would not have cried like I did
When my pay was cut.
I would not have felt so dejected
When I had to fight to get paid even what little I was owed
For the third time.
I would not have lashed out like I did, at others as stuck in these structures as I
am
When I didn't like their tone when they delivered me the messages that threatened
my income.
I would not have lost so much sleep worrying about deadlines, about angry emails,
about how I was failing my students, about whether, between my four different
jobs, I would be able to pay my rent next month.

I would have been able to handle all this
If I'd taken better care of myself
If I'd only built up my resilience.

And it's only now
That I've found my feet again
(and yes
I did meditate
And did do breathing exercises
And all the things I was supposed to do
And yes, they did help)

It's only now that I feel myself again
And trust myself again
That I can say

That I was never meant to handle this.
That we're not meant to handle this.

That when you're telling me to be resilient you are really telling me that I am failing
the system, when really it is the system that is failing me.

So fuck you.

Fuck you for sending me invitations to stress reduction courses
While you make me teach larger classes for less money.
Fuck you for sending me booklets with breathing exercises
While my workload grows higher and higher
And fuck you, especially, for telling me to work on my resilience
While you try to dismantle the pension
That I can't even pay into yet
Because you prefer to give me four casual jobs, rather than one contracted one.

Because you and I both know that if you take this pension from me
It will mean I was living a lie
That I was lying to myself
Thinking my precariousness was just a temporal phenomena
A stage I have to go through, on my way to the stability of tenure.
Instead I can look forward to lying awake at night again
Worrying about how I will pay my rent when I'm too old to do a squat, a plank, a
downward facing dog.

And, seriously, fuck that. And, seriously, fuck you.

I refuse to be resilient.
I refuse to be ok with this because I am not.
Because none of us are. Not really.
I refuse to numb myself
to the pain caused by a system
Which treats me like a thing.

I refuse to be complicit in my own oppression.

I will continue to meditate (irregularly)

Because it helps me calm my mind and to know myself (and I'm getting to like this person that I'm learning I am)

I will continue to draw

Because it brings me joy (but under no circumstances will I 'practice' drawing.)

I have made peace with the fact that my tomatoes are all dead.

I will go for walks when the weather is nice.

Occasionally, when my back feels tight,

I will squat

I will plank

I will do my downward facing dog.

But do not for a second think that I am doing any of these things for you,

That they will make me more

Resilient

Efficient

Compliant

That they will make me forget.

Don't think for a second that they will make me forget

The better world that I deserve.

The better world I can imagine.

The world I have seen on picket lines

And community halls

In whispered conversations

And shouted in slogans

Scrawled all over sidewalks

And written on the internet.

Because fuck you and your individualising bullshit.

Because I know (as we all know)

That this is a world we can only achieve together

And that this is a world that we can achieve together.

Because while I refuse to take

Responsibility for my own suffering

I will gladly accept
Responsibility for our collective wellbeing.

We are the university

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cardiff.ac.uk](https://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk)).*

“Britain First” or White Privilege Reloaded?

Brexit on Screen and Stage

Anke Bartels

(University of Potsdam)

“Vote Leave, Take Back Control”, was the main slogan of the Leavers in the run-up to the referendum trying to establish if Britain should remain in or leave the European Union. Supposedly about freedom from Brussels and EU regulations, the idea of taking control of the country, the economy but, most importantly, the borders (and the future of migration connected to them) played a much more decisive role in the final outcome of the vote for Brexit. At the heart of this lies a populist resurgence of nationalism, which has its roots in a deep-seated fear of migration and a mourning of the alleged losses with regard to a British culture and a British identity defined as ultimately white. As a result, multiculturalism was declared a failed project by creating a moral panic about migration as well as security and order accompanied by an increasing racism directed against all people not perceived to be part of the illustrious community defined in this manner.

These sentiments are also documented in two recent British productions which aim at making the voices of ‘the people’ audible, *Brexit Shorts*, a series of short clips launched online in two instalments a year after the referendum, and *My Country*, a play beginning its stage life at the National Theatre in London at roughly the same time. After a few introductory remarks on the tenets of populism and racism in Britain, I will show how these are represented in both productions in the (sometimes unconscious) reflection of white privilege in the expressed sentiments of ‘the people’ shown on stage and screen.

Populism, Racism and the Question of White Privilege

A common denominator of right-wing populist movements seems to be their claim to speak for all people

while usually establishing a claim to the moral high road. In a fitting example, Nigel Farage celebrated the outcome of the Brexit referendum as “a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people” (Duffy & Norris 2017, 49). But what about the other 48%? Are they not real? And who are these real people that are, for example, represented in the Leavers’ campaign? Probably for the most part not Black people because, despite Britain’s colonial past (or more probably because of it), Britishness still seems to be predominantly defined as white. Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever have shown that this was clearly reflected in the narrative of the Leave campaign which

was underscored by two contradictory but inter-locking visions. The first was a deep nostalgia for empire, but one secured through an occlusion of the underside of the British imperial project: the corrosive legacies of colonialism and racism, past and present. The second was a more insular, Powellite narrative of retreating from a globalizing world that is no longer recognizably “British”. What gave these visions such traction [...] was that they carefully activated long-standing racialized structures of feeling about immigration and national belonging. (Virdee & McGeever 2017, 2f.)

In her book *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, Reni Eddo-Lodge painstakingly analyses the structural racism at the heart of British society, which despite all talk of



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meritocracy hinders equal opportunities and bestows negative stereotypes on Black people. In this context white privilege “is an absence of the negative consequences of racism”, which will “positively impact your life’s trajectory in some way. And you probably won’t even notice it” (Eddo-Lodge 2018, 86f.). Eddo-Lodge goes on to show that discussions about an erosion of Britishness or the preservation of an alleged national identity are usually directed against Black people. She states that “[t]he word multiculturalism has become proxy for a ton of British anxieties about immigration, race, difference, crime and danger. It’s now a dirty word, a front word for fears about black and brown and foreign people posing a danger to white Brits” (Eddo-Lodge 2018, 119). This became especially explicit in the Brexit

campaigns of the Leavers who wanted their country back or were warning about the ‘Islamisation’ of Britain.

Of course, white privilege does not mean exactly the same for all white

and are accused of unjustly benefitting from British achievements (as became visible in the recent Windrush scandal which clearly demonstrated that people from the Caribbean once invited to help rebuilding Britain after the Second World War are still not accepted as British citizens). In a similar vein, Black people are no homogeneous group either. With regard to the Brexit referendum, this is clearly discernible in the paradox of Black votes for the Leave campaign, which will be explored later.

My Country: A Work in Progress – But whose country is it?

My Country by poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy and NT director Rufus Norris is a piece of verbatim theatre interspersed with poetry by Duffy. In the days after the results of the Brexit referendum, interviewers collected testimonials from people aged between 9 and 97 all over the country, resulting in more than 300 hours of tape. The finished play was first staged at the Dorfman auditorium of the National Theatre on 28 February 2017 and went on to be toured nationally. It is dedicated to the memory of Jo Cox, the pro-EU Labour MP who was murdered by a right-wing extremist shouting “Britain first, keep Britain independent, Britain will always come first” (Cobain et al. 2016) while inflicting the deadly knife wounds.



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Brits as you have to take class, gender and other factors into account, which affect access to it in complex ways, but it remains a fact that at the heart of the campaign of those supporting to leave the European Union, a monocultural form of identity politics can be discerned that constructs the ‘real’ British people as a homogenous group united by the fantasy of a common language, a shared history and, at least just as important, of having the same skin colour, i.e. being racialized as white. Those who do not belong to the ‘we’ constructed in this manner fall prey to populist propaganda

My Country opens to the arrival of Britannia, a bureaucrat soon adorned with Union Jack shield, plumed helmet and trident, who has called for a meeting of her people represented by personified Caledonia, Cymru, East Midlands, North East, Northern Ireland and the South West. In the mundane setting of a plain room with lined-up desks and ballot boxes at the rear of the stage, the spectators are introduced to the different parts of the United Kingdom, which appear to be far from united as their squabbles about sports or their specific use of regional language show.

But despite all these visible differences, Britannia tries to construct them as one nation so that all join in the naming of important dates like the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320, the Inclosure Act of 1801 or the start of the Second World War in 1939. Along with these events, 1975, the year when Britain joined the Common Market, is given prominence by being placed in the genealogy of monumental historical watersheds. But instead of proceeding in the collective voices of the regions, the play cleverly shows these to be comprised of numerous separate voices who will utter their perspectives on the European Union and what it means to them. This also makes for some humorous moments as the actors representing the respective regions, who are, in turn, represented by the people's collected voices, hold

up a photograph of the person whose testimonial they render, which often runs counter to their own gender, race or age. Britannia, on the other hand, represents the voices of Westminster like those of Nigel Farage, David Cameron or Boris Johnson. To overcome their divisions, Britannia and the regions decide to engage in "The Sacrament of Listening" (Duffy & Norris 2017, 11), as opposed to an analysis, postulating this to be the only way for productive change.

The increasingly fragmented, verbatim voices thus make up the eleven parts following the opening scene of arrival. The first of these, "The Six Arias", provides an overview of the state of the various regions through the eyes of their inhabitants, which shows the country to be separated by class, gender, race and sexuality. It becomes clear that the United Kingdom is decidedly "not a land of milk and honey" (14), especially with regard to the lives of migrants. The next five parts are dedicated to the voices, which go on to speak about Europe, patriotism, hardship, immigration, listening and leadership. During these parts many topics are touched upon and it becomes clear that the widening gap between rich and poor as well as the overall insecurity the people feel is not necessarily directly related to the European Union but rather to the effects of neoliberal capitalism and the aftermath of the financial crisis. But the

voices don't realise this as it seems to be much easier to put all the blame on membership in the European Union. This is eerily summarised in Farage's words who "wants to put our own people first" (21), worded not dissimilarly from the sentiment exclaimed by Cox's murderer.



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Immigration, one of the key topics during the campaigns of Leavers and Remainers, is also the title of one part of the play, but is tellingly also touched upon in all the other parts. It starts off with Britannia speaking in Nigel Farage's voice who proclaims that "people are very upset, they're very unhappy" (23) about the perceived impact that migrants have on British society, in this instance especially on the education and health systems. While there are also dissenting voices, the by now perpetually evoked stereotypes of migrants as "murders and rapists" (24), benefit scroungers (24),

terrorists - even in Wiltshire (24), women with burkas who visibly do not want to integrate because it is "not a burka, it's a balaclava" (27) are repeated. A telling example is Julie's voice who relates how she wanted to claim benefits and was denied help, only to witness accommodation and money being granted to a migrant from Somalia, leaving her "there in tears on crutches" (23). In these voices, a wide consent seems to be that migrants ruined an Arcadian Britain, which needs to be defended to honour the forefathers (all male, of course) who gave their lives for building it in the first place. At this point, it is happily forgotten that many people from the former colonies fought in the World Wars as well and were later encouraged to move to the 'Motherland' in order to help rebuilding it.

Still, the voices quoted here would deny any accusation of racism. Thus, South West muses that "[w]e grew up thinking we were the best country in the world, you know, were tolerant of gay, we're tolerant of um um race..." (19), while Northern Ireland (Niamh) ponders about the worst insults in society and comes to the conclusion that the prize won't go to slut anymore but "the worst insult that you can say to someone is you're a racist" (29), implying that tolerance has gone too far but also denying the structural racism at the heart of British society which is the unacknowledged foundation of white privilege.

After venting their anger at all problems beseeching the country, the voices are briefly silenced by Britannia’s attempt to emphasise the unity of the people in diversity by taking on her role



© ‘Britannia’ by [Richard Croft](#) via [geograph.org.uk](#)

as mother of the nation. Her grief is beautifully rendered in Duffy’s poetry:

I am your memory, your dialects, your cathedrals, // your mosques and markets, schools and pubs, // your woods, mountains, rivers... // your motorways and railway lines, your hospitals, // your cenotaphs with paper poppies fading in the rain. // [...] We are far more united... // We are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us (39).

After a feast, the vote is cast which exposes the fear of the other

expressed through racism and the division surfaces again – and not only between the regions but equally between the people living in them. The play just about ends with the stereotypical rallying call to “get on with it” (51) and a very quaint definition of Britishness:

Last night I felt more British than I’d ever felt. We were in a damp shed, brewing tea, pouring down rain, freezing cold. Committed to a project that is far too complicated for wa. That, that to me is Britishness (55f.).

After this testimonial the regions start to leave with a strangely united, resigned reaction to Brexit and a move back to the very beginning of the play. The overall sentiment now is rather one of defeat as expressed by Britannia’s last lines asking an empty room to listen.

While the idea of representing all these voices as a document of popular sentiments is very laudable, the effect is rather a cacophony of different complaints and contradictions that are only given voice in a fragmented way without trying to render the arguments more comprehensible or placing them in a context allowing for an ideological critique.

***Brexit Shorts: Dramas from a Divided Nation* – Different perspectives on change**

In July 2016, right before Article 50 was triggered, *The Guardian* had already commissioned one of the first plays to deal with the political implications of Brexit, James Graham's *A Strong Exit* (Graham 2016) set in the Department for Exiting the European Union. In June 2017, the paper collaborated with touring company Headlong Theatre and leading British dramatists to come up with *Brexit Shorts*, a series of nine short monologues directed by Jeremy Herrin, Amy Hodge, Maxine Peake and Elen Bowman. They deal with various issues prominent in the discussions about Brexit, but are above all aiming at giving voice to a divided nation. The first five of these were aired on 19th June 2017 to be followed by a second instalment on 26th June.

In a fashion not dissimilar to the efforts of the National Theatre's *My Country*, the *Brexit Shorts* also place a special emphasis on the way Brexit was discussed in the regions by Remainers as well as Leavers, while at the same time putting a focus on the need for further dialogue and listening to each other by means of addressing the past with regard to the causes as well as the future in terms of the consequences of the referendum. Amy Hodge, associate director at Headlong, stated that they

are all struck by how polarised opinions are over this issue and, particularly in the fallout of the referendum, how the artistic community seemed so surprised by the result. It seemed to me that people in the UK, for a myriad of reasons, simply stopped listening to each other (Wiegand, 2017).

Despite the different scenarios chosen by the individual playwrights, all of the short videos start with a shot defining the setting, which gives the regions a well-known, stereotypical face. Thus Scotland is represented by the dark alleyways behind George Square in Glasgow, Northern Ireland by the peace lines or the Home Counties by a well-kept English garden. The short monologues, spoken directly to the camera, try to represent different gender, race and class perspectives while a multitude of Brexit-related issues is pondered. Just like in the verbatim theatre of *My Country*, in the scripted plays white privilege also comes across strongly.

In three monologues, female characters were chosen as protagonists who are a mix of Remainers and Leavers. Thus in David Hare's "Time to Leave", Eleanor, a white middle-class woman, mourns the loss of her country. While using the typical disclaimer that she is no racist, she still believes that the EU was "bound to fail once the Mediterraneans flocked in" (Hare 2017) because they changed the quality of the union of allegedly white northern European countries. In

the same vein, she opts for a resurrection of the Irish border, as "good fences make good neighbours" (Hare 2017). Hare tries to make visible that even middle-class people like Eleanor blame the EU for inner-British problems while not reflecting on the fact that they still partake of white privilege. But the basically unchanged situation after the Brexit vote only leaves disillusionment behind.

Helen, the protagonist in Abi Morgan's "The End", perceives the state of the nation quite differently. Using the metaphor of a marriage which has failed after 43 years, we learn that Helen's door "is always open. You'd just let anyone in" (Morgan 2017), putting her in stark contrast to her husband who strongly objected to this and made it the main reason for leaving. By means of this metaphor, there is a clear indication that migrants (or people perceived as such) are to blame, even if this is done indirectly, for the increasingly stress- and harmful relationship between Britain and Europe. Unhappy about being left behind, Helen decides to make the divorce as costly as possible – just as the looming divorce bill of the EU is perceived in Britain.

James Graham's "Burn" takes a slightly different tack by exploring the role of the social media. Geraldine, a Mansfield mum, sets Remainers and Leavers against each other as an internet troll. She sees this kind of action as part of a larger genealogy, which is linked to her

mother's commitment during the miner's strike as well as to the activities of her grandmother during the Second World War. Her self-declared interest is to produce chaos, but she does this from a position of white privilege, which allows her to set NF followers against migrants without being accountable for her actions.

Another three of the short monologues look to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as those regions who constitute, together with England, the United Kingdom. "Three Pines", which was performed in Welsh with English subtitles, alludes to the role of British farmers who apparently voted against the EU despite the fact that they get their subsidies from Brussels. The nameless dairy farmer in the video points out that people in his situation were not stupid when voting to leave the European Union, but are losers in the fight for a decent livelihood despite all subsidies.

The question of class is also prominent in A. L. Kennedy's "Permanent Sunshine", in which we listen to Chummy ranting in a broad Scottish accent about joblessness and the lack of opportunities, which killed his father, only to have our prejudices revealed when Chummy turns out to be a sociology student. The short play highlights the divisions between Scotland and the rest of the UK but also takes a broader view in analysing social ills. Thus, Chummy, who feels not represented by Westminster, claims

that “Poverty makes you a refugee” (Kennedy 2017). While it cannot be denied that the gap between rich and poor is on the increase, being a refugee is quite different from being poor and white because white privilege still allows for a different place in British society.

becomes a strong symbol for a kind of unity that has been fought for with immense violence, while refugees remain the other who have to be denied entrance.

Finally, three monologues focus on Black British people and migrants, all



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Stacy Gregg’s “Your Ma’s a Hard Brexit” deals with the specific situation in Northern Ireland. A nameless protestant mother walking along the peace lines separating Catholics and Protestants is faced with the outcome of the referendum dividing her family. Her husband is applying for an Irish passport as he wants to go where the work is, while her Unionist father still clings to his Britishness. The border in Northern Ireland is an extremely sensitive issue and with Brexit looming it might reappear despite all negotiations because otherwise it might become “the only land border for immigration and terrorists (Gregg 2017). The absence of a hard border

those who do not conform to notions of white Britishness. People who do not own British passports, are at the centre of Maxine Peake’s “Shattered”. Dalir, an immigration lawyer in Manchester’s Moss Side, tries hard to protect people’s rights after the Brexit vote especially in the face of an exploding racism. The vulnerability of people like Ayesha from Pakistan is demonstrated clearly but despite her hopeless situation, the play ends on a note of hopefulness with the choir of *Women Asylum Seekers Together* showing that solidarity and unity do exist after all. This is nonetheless a very stereotypical representation as the all-black choir indulges happily in African song.

Solidarity is at the heart of Meera Syal’s “Just a T-Shirt”, too, while it also explores the paradox of Black and minority ethnic British people voting Leave. The eponymous T-Shirt bears the slogan “Send Them All Back”, an eerie manifestation of the all-pervasive racism erupting after the referendum. Priri, a British-born Indian woman from the West Midlands played by Syal herself, voted “Leave” because she regarded herself as one of the well-integrated, good immigrants right down to the point at which she repeats the common stereotypes against Romanians and other EU migrants. She feels to have a special standing in British society by virtue of having “been here first” (Syal 2017). But the Nazi wearing the T-Shirt does not attack her Polish neighbour who has the privilege of being white-skinned, but instead calls her a “Paki bitch” (Syal 2017) and spits her in the face. In the wake of this, she is left disillusioned and with the feeling of not really belonging, while realising that she will always be othered because of her skin colour.

Charlene James’s “Go Home” gives a voice to the former industrial cities of the North where the feeling to be the losers of the globalised world of the 21st century is very strong. Reece, a young Black man from Wigan who went to study in London, claims that “52% of the country can’t all be scum. They can’t all be idiots, racists or xenophobes” (James

2017) and pleads for a dialogue in which all British people try and understand each other in order to overcome the strong dividing lines. This monologue definitely further complicates the issue of reducing the Leave campaign to racist arguments. The question remains, though, who is to be included in this dialogue and who will be left out as the unappreciated “other”.

The *Brexit Shorts* show the strong desire to understand why so many people voted to leave the European Union without really trying to give answers. Still, Leavers and Remainers alike stop to be an anonymous mass and become individual characters with an understandable story, which might just turn into a first step to commence with a dialogue in a divided nation. It remains, however, questionable if this dialogue would include the question of white privilege or the exploding instances of racism, which don’t seem to be foremost on the agenda of most people dealing with the aftermath of Brexit.

Both, *My Country* and *Brexit Shorts*, capture the disillusionment within a British society divided by a multitude of rifts created by neo-liberal capitalism and an urgent desire for change. While membership in the European Union serves as a scapegoat for internal problems and divisions, the exploding racism witnessed not only in the campaign of the Leavers but also in the aftermath of the referendum shows that white

privilege has never been overcome and othering is still present in many guises, not least in targeting British people who just don't happen to be racialized as white. This is not likely to change, either by leaving or staying in the EU.

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Who Can We Laugh At?

British Humour in Times of Brexit

Aileen Behrendt

(University of Potsdam)

“**B**ecause say what you like about the English, but our saving grace, the thing we’ve always been famous for, is our ability to laugh at other people” (Finnemore S.2, Ep.6, 1:39-1:48). In the award-winning sketch comedy series John Finnemore’s *Souvenir Programme*, John Finnemore takes on the role of an elderly gentleman, who self-identifies as a member of the ‘silent majority’, which he paradoxically believes to be the last persecuted minority. The cranky old man complains to an implied pub audience that political correctness limits his ability to tell his racist jokes and thus undermines his national identity. Through this character, Finnemore pokes fun at the way British humour is often uncritically celebrated as a commendable national trait. Though this sketch was broadcast some years before Brexit, Finnemore’s xenophobic and paranoid character is clearly modelled on the stereotype of the UKIP voter or the would-be Brexit supporter who gives rousing speeches at

the local pub. Naturally British humour extends beyond petty taunts and racist jeers, but their pervasiveness has become more visible since the referendum. As Finnemore’s character points out, the country has always been renowned for its sense of humour, but who or what do they laugh at in Brexit Britain? After all, Brexit is a political event that has deeply divided the nation. Can British humour smooth things over? Or is British humour itself too divided?

To answer this, I turn to British comedy with examples from radio, television, print and theatre and examine how they negotiate Brexit. One disclaimer: most examples chosen back Remain, but I want to show how this is not without its ambiguities. Though there has been a lot of comedy, not all intentional, on the political stage, most Brexit comedy can still be found in the media. Even the comedy in and of politics

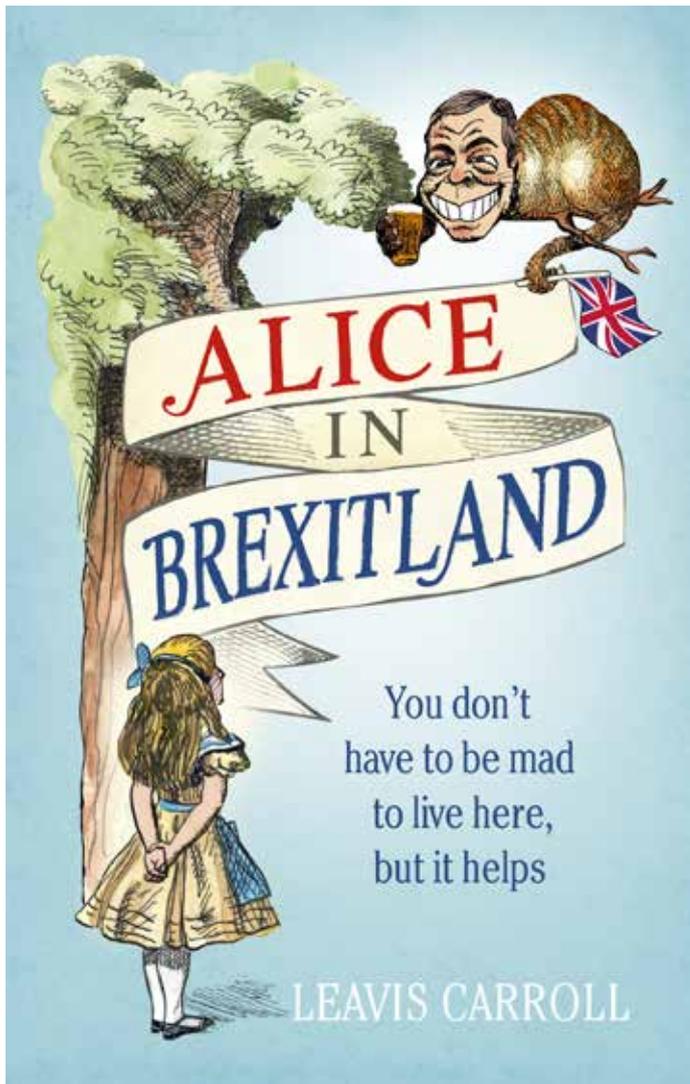
often draws their inspiration from media texts. Remember, for instance, the immortal image of Theresa May sharing a literal political stage at the general elections of 2017 with Lord Buckethead, the self-described ‘intergalactic space lord’, whose costume resembles that of the Black Knight from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. With a similar – and necessary – eye for the absurd, British comedy targets Brexit politics.

Brexit Humour

Whether the comedians supported Remain or Leave, political campaigns, along with their politicians, proved to be easy marks for comedy. In the days leading up to the referendum political figures like Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson, Michael Gove (all Leave) and David Cameron (Remain), whose antics gave the comedians plenty of ammunition, often found themselves to be the butt of a joke. But along with cheap jibes at politicians, like the posh David Cameron, the smug Nigel Farage or the unkempt Boris Johnson, came more serious political charges. Boris Johnson’s dishevelled appearance would lead to a discussion of his wild claims in support of Brexit. Thus, US-based British Comedian John Oliver, host of HBO’s successful news satire *Last Week Tonight*, characterised Johnson as “a man with both the look and the economic insight of Bamm-Bamm from the Flintstones”

(3:22-3:25). With this apt comparison, Oliver comments on the economic repercussions of Brexit and disproves many Leave campaign claims, such as the infamous one printed on a bright red bus about the £350 million Great Britain presumably sends the EU every week.

Another political satire in favour of Remain, written by Lucien Young, recasts all the significant Brexit politicians as characters of Lewis Carroll’s children’s classic *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Young retells the story of Alice who follows the nervous rabbit Dave down a rabbit-hole only to end up in the strange Brexitland, populated by characters like the Corbynpillar, Humpty Trumpty and Cheshire Twat (Farage) and governed by “the terrifying Queen of Heartlessness, who’ll take off your head if you dare question her plan for Brexit”. The subtitle of Young’s satirical adaption, “You don’t have to be mad to live here, but it helps”, humorously sums up the socio-political climate felt by Remain supporters in the wake of Brexit. The lack of political direction and rationale is constantly mocked by Remain comedies. The satirical website *The Daily Mash* (similar to the German *Der Postillon*) ridiculed May’s divisive politics, running headlines such as: “Unite around my nutter’s version of Brexit, May tells Britain”. Chris Bryant and Bronagh Lagan put Britain’s lack of political direction on a bigger stage – literally. Their Edinburgh



© 'Alice in Brexitland' by Lucien Young, Ebury Press

Festival Fringe success *Brexit – The Musical* frames the absence of a political course as a satirical quest narrative, advertising the musical on their website with the promise: “Somewhere out there, there’s a plan for Brexit. There’s just one small hitch – its writer has amnesia and no-one else knows where it is. It’s up to our hero, Boris Johnson, to find it. Devastated by his monumental cock-up of winning the referendum, this is the only way for Boris to gain redemption and save the nation from Brexit.”

Many Remainers have found some solace in this sudden abundance of political comedy, like John Ryan, professor at the London School of Economics, who applauds how “the desire to salvage some comic value from the Brexit negotiations, and the chief political players, has inspired plenty of satire – something the British have long excelled at.” Disillusioned by national politics, he relies on humour to boost his national pride. This move is very common in Brexit Britain – especially for Remainers. It seems that little else can be done when a country has made a disastrous decision and the political opposition is powerless to change it. In his review of *Brexit, the Musical* for the *Guardian*, Will Hutton goes so far as to pin his political hopes on comedy entirely, believing that comedy can do what Remain politics couldn’t: to sway an audience by presenting political arguments in an engaging manner. As political scientist Richard Bellamy puts it: “The comparative failure of the Remain campaign to mount even a negative political case against leaving, let alone to give positive political (or, for that matter, economic) reasons for European integration, served simply to further legitimise the Leave campaign’s democratic argument for Brexit” (223). Hutton recognises this gaping political deficit and hopes that “Satire – showing how the project and people behind it are completely farcical – has the

better chance of persuading millions in any imminent electoral or second referendum test that they have been sold a pup and must save themselves from both the perpetrators and the wreckage.” While many Remainers resignedly shake their heads and despair over Britain shooting itself in the foot, this counter-intuitive move is comedy gold.

The Tragi-Comic Campaigns and the Voters

Although traditional British sketch comedy often shies away from direct political commentary, apparently an untenable position in Brexit Britain, John Finnemore hilariously outlines the self-sabotage of the Leave campaign and its supporters by relying on an English idiom and transforming the entire debate into a referendum about whether or not Christmas should be a holiday. His 2016 Christmas Special features a series of sketches in which an interviewer tries to chart the motivations of pro-Christmas voters. But, one should note, the voters are all turkeys. And their pro-vote takes on an even more sinister twist. As one turkey enthusiastically points out, the pro-Christmas campaign has “consistently promised that if their holiday goes ahead, everyone will get three days off and a lovely big dinner.” (S6, Ep.1, 7:46-7:51). The turkeys’ motivations sum up the Leave supporters’ general responses when asked why they voted for Brexit.

They cite such reasons as the negativity of the Remain campaign (a dislike for the Easter rabbit/Cameron), through the likeability of the Leave politicians (like the jolly Santa /Johnson), to the general political apathy and disenchantment. However, Finnemore highlights that no matter the reasons or excuses given, the outcome will be most damaging, especially for the large demographic that voted for Brexit/Christmas. Because this vote is irreversible, Finnemore emphasises that political disillusionment is no excuse for political short-sightedness.

‘Excuse me, I’m interviewing turkeys about why they voted for Christmas’.

‘Oh well they’re all the same really, aren’t they. You know, these holidays. Christmas, Easter, Valentine’s Day. So I just voted Christmas to send a message, really.’

‘And what is that message?’

‘Well, that I’m cross.’

‘I see, and if we do have Christmas this year, do you think your message will get across?’ ‘Yeah, I think so. And if it doesn’t, I’ll just send another message next Christmas.’

‘Will you?’

‘Yeah, why wouldn’t I?’

‘No reason.’ (S6, Ep.1, 21:02-21:36)

While pointing out the repercussions of a protest vote, this sketch also

highlights how the Remain campaign had completely underestimated the widespread distrust against politicians and any institutions associated with them.

The BBC Radio 4 news satire *The Now Show*, in their special issue, “The Vote Now Show: EU and Yours”, analyses why. In their multi-voiced sketches the series’ hosts Steven Punt and Hugh Dennis, along with other actors, humorously dissect the arguments that have been circulating in the media to show how little is actually known about what a Brexit would mean for Britain. They point out that Michael Gove seems to have nothing else to say than that Britain has to ‘Take back control’ to expose that apart from their slogan, the Leave campaign’s arguments are limited, false and repetitive. But they also demonstrate why the valid Remain argument about severe financial repercussions falls on deaf ears with Leave supporters:

so none of these predictions of economic doom seem to have worked because of the many chickens coming home to roost in this referendum, the biggest and juiciest fowl striding confidently back into the hen house is this:

(fanfare) Nobody trusts anything economists say!

Because?

Because none of them saw the financial crisis

coming when it was right on top of them.

Yes, now the media forgot this almost immediately, but the public didn’t. And perhaps the greatest revelation of this campaign has been the extent to which the economic and political establishment appear to have no credibility with a large chunk of the public at all. (10:20-10:40)

Many comedians, including those who supported Remain, share this distrust with the general public. In fact, much Remain comedy shows an enduring ambivalence about voting Remain. Even politically astute and analytical shows like *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver or *The Now Show*, which each devoted an episode broadcast shortly before the referendum to discuss the consequences of Brexit, couldn’t fully convince themselves or their audiences about the benefits of a continued EU membership. The reluctance is encapsulated by the closing song of each show – a British comedy tradition that goes back to the music halls (Alexander 65). These songs highlight not only how difficult it is to break out of the negatively framed Remain arguments, but also implicitly how the binary choices left by the referendum failed to fully represent the relationship between the EU and Britain. While Oliver clearly spoke out for Remain, his *Last Week Tonight* closes with “Ode to Joy”, rewritten to express Britain’s dislike of the EU with the chorus: “Fuck you, European Union”. Oliver suggested this

song would serve to scratch the itch of many British citizens to tell the EU off so that they can eventually follow their sanity and vote Remain. Had this been an actual political gambit, the outcome of the referendum would be puzzling to no one. However, though only a crude comic relief at first glance, it still mirrors the attitudes of many Remain supporters. From its inception Britain's relationship with the EU had been a rocky one. Oliver, in his ironic bid for Remain, does not attempt to disguise the persisting scepticism and animosity:

but here is how I feel about the EU: it's a complicated, bureaucratic, ambitious, overbearing, inspirational, and consistently irritating institution. And Britain would be absolutely crazy to leave it. Especially because, if it stays, it can reap all the benefits, while still being a total dick about everything. And that is the British way. (13:02-13:25).

Whose Brexit is it anyways?

One of the paradoxes surrounding Brexit was that Britain never fully considered itself as part of the EU and comedians swiftly pointed out the political hypocrisies of the Remain campaign, and especially its representative David Cameron. In his closing song for *The Now Show*, Mitch Benn, tentatively supporting Remain, builds on this ambiguity and attempts a reconciliatory note for a divided nation:

if we're gonna stay, how's about we do it properly this time? [...] And if we're gonna leave, can it be for a good reason please? Not just because little England thinks of things foreign as sinister. [...] And whatever we do, how's about we chill the heck out? And if this is about being proud to be British, I've always been proud we get along. And if this comes between us, then it would be desperately sad." (26:50-28:13)

What many who use or insist on the British sense of humour to deal with Brexit seem to conveniently forget: Britain has never been a country where everyone 'got along'. Let's not forget that only two years prior to the Brexit referendum, Scotland held one to decide if they should leave the UK. The Irish comedy team *Foil Arms and Hog* comments on the conflicts of interest of the individual nations in the United Kingdom. In a sketch set at the urinals, a symbolism that chiefly adds to the political joke, the character portrayed by Sean Flanagan tries to bring his colleague, Sean Finegan's character, up to speed for their meeting about Brexit and the UK. Only problem is: Finegan's character remains hopelessly confounded by the whole concept of the UK. In an attempt to alleviate his confusion, they discuss how the nations work together in sports events, such as the Olympics, the European Championship and Rugby, only to realise that the teams



© *Foil Arms & Hog* (source)

are formed differently at each event.

The Brexit referendum triggered an identity crisis for an already fragile national construct. And humour became an anchor point. Facing an uncertain socio-economic future on top of a rekindling of debates about the Northern Irish border and Scotland's hopes for independence from the UK, not to mention the deep rift apparent in the narrow margin with which the Leave vote won, the British media scrambled to offer a silver lining. Like the LSE professor John Ryan who delights in the many new political satires, several newspaper and news websites rejoiced at the stiff upper lip and the British sense of humour in times of national crisis.

A day after the referendum, the tabloid *The Mirror* titled "Brits are managing to poke fun at Brexit - and the results are surprisingly uplifting – Post Brexit life in the UK may look uncertain, but hey, let's try to see the funny side". In this article, Zahra Mulroy assembled humorous twitter responses to the results of the referendum, largely from Remain supporters. The news website *Quartz* ran a similar article "Pub?": Brits respond to Brexit with typically British gallows humor", in which Olivia Goldhill quotes from the twitter accounts of mostly high-profile British comedians like David Mitchell, Jake Whitehall, and Ricky Gervais, the latter tweeting: "I can't believe that it took a referendum for Britain's youth to find out that old

people hate them”. Here, Gervais tries to make light of how the different age demographics voted and that the age group that favoured Remain will be the one most affected by the Leave vote.

Brexit – the Flip Side of British Humour?

While many subscribe to “the age-old adage and widely held, yet empirically unfounded, belief that ‘laughter is the best medicine’” (Longo 113), others remain sceptical that British humour can exist in times of Brexit. Zoe Williams, writing for the *Guardian*, alleges that British national identity centred first and foremost on irony, a trait which seems to have become obsolete: “I cannot, however, reconcile myself to this post-English politics, pumped-up, self-regarding and humourless. If our national identity meant anything, Brexit is its opposite”. Her central argument runs thus: any expression of national pride before Brexit had been checked by the British sense of humour that generated an ironic self-deprecation so that nationalism would not run rampant. However, now, she laments “it’s the exceptionalism, freely

vented for the world to hear, that is the most embarrassing” (Williams). But isn’t the insistence on the wonderful British sense of humour, the apparent staple of British identity, one of the pillars of the nation’s exceptionalism? In times of Brexit, this pillar has been shaken. While many are quick to insist on it, others are uneasily reminded that the institution of British comedy has a long and unsavoury tradition of laughing at minorities. Its



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power, which so many believe to be a force of salvation, is therefore limited. As Richard Alexander puts it, “The predominantly right-wing orientation of British humour is a barrier to those who would wish to promote change through comedy” (82). Especially in times of Brexit, with hate crimes against minorities on the rise, comedians have become more and more self-aware of this.

This article included mostly Remain comedians who self-consciously oppose the notion that humour is beyond reproach. They often do not subscribe to the saving grace of the British sense of humour, but see it for what it is: part of the problem. After all, the long tradition of racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist comedy nurtured many resentments that have risen to the surface in the debate about Brexit. The xenophobic implications of Brexit make the debate about what is and what isn't funny in British comedy more urgent. John Finnemore's 'silent majority' character quoted at the beginning parodies the ignorant attitude that uses the British sense of humour as an excuse to be a bigot who can only applaud Britain's isolationist strive: "Shall I tell you the sixth worst thing about political correctness? (...) It is the erosion of the great British sense of humour. I don't mind telling you that I'm renowned in my circle for my jokes, my three jokes. The one about the gay terrorist, the one about the Irishman with a wooden leg and the one about the octopus. And now, under the suffocating, nanny PC regime, I can't tell any of them. – The octopus is Jewish." (S2, Ep.6, 1:00-1:39). Unfortunately, Brexit seems to revive and legitimise that interpretation of the British sense of humour.

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Fiction in Dark Times: the Brexit Novel and Ali Smith

Harald Pittel

(*University of Potsdam*)

The 2016 vote to leave the European Union has incited many tormenting questions regarding the present state and future development of British society. Contemporary novelists are reacting differently to this situation, giving rise to what some reviewers have labelled “the post-referendum novel”, “Brexit fiction” or simply “Brexitlit”. It seems well worth investigating what constitutes this emergent strand of literature in terms of common themes and shared prospects. How do authors with different backgrounds approach the referendum and its implications? To what extent can such fiction be understood as a new phenomenon, or even genre in its own right? And which are the strategies chosen to make literature function as political engagement? After a general survey of the field, this article will have a closer look at Ali Smith’s *Autumn* and *Winter*, often hailed as the landmarks of Brexit fiction.

Does Brexitlit mean Brexitlit?

To begin with, there have been both broader and more narrow assessments of what qualifies as Brexitlit in the first place. Overviews include books that appeared before and after the vote, and which were written in various cultural and political contexts. For example, in his detailed account of the new literary landscape published in *Financial Times*, Jon Day also includes Howard Jacobson’s anti-Trump satire *Pussy* (2015).¹ A reviewer for the *Guardian*, Danuta Kean, draws attention, among others, to Heinz Helle’s *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen* (2015, translated into English as *Euphoria*)², an apocalyptic vision of (German-yet-generalisable) consumer society. However, what most approaches to Brexit fiction have in common is that they are indeed centred on contemporary Britain, and while some of these books take issue with its political elites and governmental system, such as Andrew

Marr's farcical thriller *Head of State* (2015) and Douglas Board's dystopian satire *Time of Lies* (2017), the more typical pre- and post-referendum novels

back cover of Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13*; see below). It should be stressed that in most Brexlit not only "Europe – as a geographical reality and political



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focus on the larger society as such. It is here that a somewhat problematic tendency becomes manifest. Most Brexit novels are more specifically written from an *English* perspective; they are concerned, like Paul Kingfield's historical novel *The Wake* (a 2013 Joyce-inspired experiment in pseudo-archaic language to probe into the past levels of collective consciousness), with "English identity", and their proceedings are located geographically somewhere between London and "the heart of England" (as indicated on the

idea – is largely absent from its pages"³ (save an EU-funded flowerbed here and there), but so are the inhabitants from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, not to speak of the larger history of immigration entailed by Britain's colonial past that would fundamentally complicate the idea of indigenous Englishness. In all these books, there can be no doubt, this is England in times of crisis, "England divided" (as in Benjamin Myers' *The Gallows Pole* (2017), which envisions the precursors of that division in history). Brexit

fiction thus privileges England in order to expose it in fractured state, typically centred around a more or less complex, and more or less fictionalized, though always threateningly deep, social conflict.

In some cases, as in McGregor's *Reservoir 13* or Adam Thorpe's *Missing Fay* (both 2017), Brexit fiction shows similarities with the crime novel. Both stories, as Jon Day adequately summarizes, revolve around a missing girl which functions as "a void at the heart of a novel that is really about our prejudices and how we fail to communicate them to one another"⁴. However, whereas the most recent instalment of Mark Billingham's successful Tom Thorne novels, *Love Like Blood* (2017), immerses the detective in a post-referendum setting, Thorpe's and McGregor's books feature yet another void as they also leave empty the *detective's* place. Unlike the traditional trajectory that is arranged around the detective as an agent restoring a certain sense of order to a world otherwise out of joint, in *Missing Fay* and *Reservoir 13* it is mainly for *the reader* to bridge the clash of widely diverging perspectives, thus encouraging the reading subject, as it were, to overcome society's communicative gaps.

This bridging approach is most conspicuously conducted in Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017), the one book that was explicitly commissioned as a "Brexit novel" by its

publisher. Advertised to offer "a fictional response to a complex issue" on the back cover, *The Cut* is centred around the chasm of understanding between Grace Trevithick, a successful London-based documentary film-maker, and Cairo Jukes, an ex-boxer from Dudley (at the centre of the formerly industrial Black Country) who is down to collecting metal from defunct factories on zero-hours contracts. Grace meets Cairo for an interview; their mutual attraction leads up to an affair in which the social and cultural distance is for a short time overcome, but when Cairo is unable to bear the difference, he feels driven to a most melodramatic (self-)destructive response. The gendered and class-marked divide thus evoked brings up several key issues in which, dramatized and distorted as they are under the fatal influence of the populist right, one can see the extent of social alienation, financial hardship and lack of solidarity that has marked pre- as well as post-referendum England. But to analyse social division in this clear-cut way has arguably little to offer for a more profound understanding why so many voted for Leave, which was by no means just a provincial or lower-class phenomenon.⁵ While there seems to be considerable interest in holding up a mirror to contemporary society, only a handful of Brexit novels make a serious effort at exploring the wider cultural dimensions of the present crisis, and there are only few examples suggesting that a

more complex approach to social critique, beyond the reduction in terms of country vs city or the like, might be in order.

From *Autumn* ...

Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), highly celebrated by the press and shortlisted for the 2017 Man Booker Prize, should be considered as an exception in this respect, one that also resists any facile categorization in terms of existing genre markers such as satire or dystopia. The first to appear in a planned quartet that follows the seasonal cycle, *Autumn* is out to exhibit a vibrant ideal, the rich potential of love as inspirational connectedness, provocatively pinned against the reality of present-day British society that has lost all its belief and hope save narrow-minded framing, compartmentalization and privatization, in short: the drawing of lines and borders for its own sake, amounting to "a new kind of detachment".⁶ While there is little resistance against this predicament, the commodified culture of meaningless delimiting and measuring exerts a severely alienating effect on individuals. Such 'unculture', the novel suggests, is what's behind the aggressive mentality of distrust and hostility that sometimes leads to outbursts of hatred, such as habitual racism, anti-immigration campaigns or the murder of Jo Cox.⁷

However, these social pathologies are also evident in the absurdity of rather harmless everyday situations. Thus when Elisabeth Demand, a 32 year-old art history lecturer, goes to the downsized post office to renew her passport using the practicable Check & Send service, she is told that her head is the wrong size and that her eyes are too small (on the photograph she intends to submit, that is). That uneasy impression about her is very much in tune with the reservations shown by her mother who has been thinking that something is wrong with her daughter since childhood days, when Elisabeth became friends with Daniel Gluck, their aging neighbour. Elisabeth's friendship with the thin and cultivated man of unclear (German-French-English) descent intensifies over the years, much to her mother's disdain, who finds such a relationship "unnatural" and "unhealthy"⁸, suspecting that Daniel must be a pervert or gay (or both). However, Daniel's desire is really much more sublime. While it remains unclear what exactly he did during his life – aside from once having written the song lyrics for a one-hit wonder – he is certainly an artist of sorts, highly receptive and expressive of what art has to offer, always intensely engaged in inspirational relations. It is this friendship in creative dialogue and joint story-making that gives Elisabeth an idea of who she actually is, as Daniel reveals to her what is really relevant about art, truth and

life itself. Her congenial friend is always on her mind as Elisabeth gradually discovers a voice, sexuality and love-life of her own, and arrives at an aesthetic ideal animated by a sense of feminism

stifling traditionalism in academia. But unlikely as it might seem, her mother, too, is eventually able to go beyond the conventional frames of thinking in which she was stuck for so many years.



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(centred around the female 1960s pop artist Pauline Boty, whose artistic vision Daniel once fell in love with and which he manages to communicate as an original experience to Elisabeth).

Having experienced the full and unrestricted potential of inspirational connectivity, Elisabeth is thus empowered to resist, at least partially, the overall conformism of the detached unculture, reacting emotionally and critically to empty conventions when facing narrow-mindedness in outsourced (formerly) public services as well as

She discovers a new way of loving when she meets Zoe, a former child-star, now a psychologist and generally an open-minded and understanding woman (such love is “unnatural” and “unhealthy”, Elisabeth mockingly remarks)⁹. On top of that, her mother turns into a political protester of sorts as she desperately attacks an ominous electric fence that is installed in open nature to usurp a piece of common land for an unclear – yet probably detrimental – purpose, its mere presence bringing up associations with detention camps for refugees. The fence is heavily guarded by security

and Elisabeth's mother is immediately arrested after the attack; however, she is firmly determined to extend her protest, planning to unrelentingly bombard the fence with a pile of desirable antiquities that previously were on her mind before she 'got political'. The fence, introduced as a key symbol of the 'new detachedness', thus transforms into a sign of hope and resistance, and it is in this sense that the novel's final lines encourage the reader to see the roses that still exist in the all-encompassing autumnal rot.

The hope the novel invests in overcoming the deplorable state of society is also formally enacted. Evoking life in its full and shared intensity, reality in *Autumn* principally eludes any endeavour to fix it to one particular point of view, as is made clear by the non-linearity and multi-perspectivity of Smith's narrative, which, indebted to Virginia Woolf in its proclivity for free indirect discourse and also inspired by Shakespeare's *Tempest*, takes the reader from dream to the everyday, a collage oscillating between past and present as well as life and death, amounting to a world in which memories and empathy are as real as any other experience. In the days of post-truth, Smith's imaginative realism seems to encourage, in a way, a return to facts – the *deeper* facts, that is, reflecting an intersubjective sense of truth that is not simply arbitrary but authentic and solidary. Such

literature is far removed from mere dystopianism, which is implied as Elisabeth, sitting at Daniel's deathbed, comes to swap her reading from *Brave New World* to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

What makes *Autumn* more convincing than other approaches to Brexit fiction, then, is that it avoids being lured too much into the discursive arena of Leave and Remain camps, while positioning itself nonetheless clearly on the latter side by capturing the mentality, or structure of feeling, of the new detachment and by animating the belief in the richness and intensity of life that comes with removing rather than erecting borders. It would hence be too simple to dismiss *Autumn* for 'merely' offering a general critique of (post-)modern alienation, of too much abstracting from the particularity of the contemporary crisis. At the same time, the novel's focus on England serves mainly to reveal the constructedness of English identity and the questionable limitations thus maintained. While the multiple French and German connections around Daniel implicitly expose the idea of separating British from European culture as utter nonsense, it is for Daniel to point out that the roots of Elisabeth's surname, "Demand", are probably French, "du monde". To be really demanding, then, is to be a citizen of the world, resisting the facile coding of identity in terms of national boundaries. Thus while Smith's

novel implicitly advocates a climate of openness regarding the ‘refugee crisis’, and casually registers immigration from Eastern Europe (as reflected in the staff of care assistants responsible for Daniel), it should be added that the Scottish writer questions more deeply the idea of an indigenous ‘core’ of the British population, exposing it as always already constituted by migration.

... to *Winter* ...

Winter (2017), the second instalment in Smith’s seasonal cycle, takes a more domestic approach at addressing the specific mood of Britain’s divided society. Loosely connected to its predecessor via shared themes and similarities in characters, *Winter* transforms Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* into a subtly crafted post-referendum allegory. The novel is centred around the Cleves family, the name evoking social cleavages against the backdrop of the deeper connections of kinship. At first sight, the two elderly Cleves sisters, Sophia and Iris, could not be further apart regarding their world-views. The introverted Sophia is a former art student and a once successful, now bankrupt and socially isolated entrepreneur, having just lost her own chain of stores specialized in home decoration, whereas Iris is a socialite and left-wing political activist, her life-long engagement ranging from anti-war to environmentalism and quite

a few other issues. No wonder that the sisters have not spoken to each other for nearly three decades. But a connection remains, as Sophia has bought the sixteen-bedroom country-house in Cornwall that was previously inhabited by Iris and her commune of political friends. In this atmosphere of stifled nostalgia, Sophia continually drifts into memories of her youth spent with Iris and feels haunted by a childlike ghost.

The Cle(a)ves also get a generational dimension as Arthur (called Art), Sophia’s son, has been left somewhat disorientated between his mother’s and aunt’s diverging outlooks. Recently dropped by his girl-friend, Charlotte, for his indifference regarding the crises of the present, Art in fact prides himself for bringing a political dimension into his blog on nature observation (“Art in Nature”), which, however, is exactly what makes Charlotte furious, dismissing Art’s project as his “*irrelevant reactionary unpolitical*” blog.¹⁰ Joining his Scrooge-like mother for Christmas, Art visits her in her (otherwise empty) house, picking up Lux on the way, a young and witty immigrant woman, beautiful and pierced, from Croatia but extraordinarily fluent in English. Having just run into her at a Bus Station, Art gives Lux the weird sum of 1008 pounds for pretending to be Charlotte during his stay with his mother. Surprisingly, skinny and homeless Lux turns out to be

a catalyst *par excellence*. Not only does she easily connect with the otherwise uncommunicative Sophia, but she also encourages Art to invite her sister, Iris, to come over as well. An unexpected get-together unfolds between the four of them, Sophia, Iris, Art and Lux – between

But the novel's meticulous allegorizing goes far beyond dramatizing the perceived and actual social divides, as it reaches out for a discussion about the deep, intricate and precarious relations between art and politics, or individualism and solidarity. Within the



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people who would otherwise have been fixated on their separate ways. Smith impressively demonstrates her skills of sketching out quirky yet to some extent plausible characters, and it is only when a general impression has been evoked regarding these individuals' overall outlooks, their divergent mental worlds, how they became what they are, that the contrary positions of the Brexit divide, the Remain and Leave camps, come to be attributed to Iris and Sophia respectively.

'logic' of this set-up, Sophia, the 'fallen artist', would embody an understanding of art as a contemplative ideal that is removed from the everyday, amounting to a detached ideal of self-cultivation that is seemingly hinted at through Iris' long-standing habit of nicknaming her "Philo". However, Iris later undercuts this lofty association with philosophy, suggesting that seeing art as a separate sphere has led her sister not to higher levels of insight, but towards sophistry and the market-place. Epitomizing the opposite position, Iris emphasizes that

art and politics are in fact identical in that they both aspire to bring out “THE HUMAN” [sic!].¹¹ It seems that Iris’ incessant engagement for a variety of political causes and movements have not helped much to form an idea of art that goes beyond such clichés.

It is for Art now to explore new ways of connecting art (which is, in a way, himself) and politics. Inspired and animated by the light-bringer Lux who acts as a fascinating-yet-evanescent embodiment of change, Art discovers that his interest in nature must be thoroughly transformed so as to quit regarding nature as a place beyond politics. He relaunches his “Art in Nature” blog, turning it into a collaborative project to which even his former girl-friend Charlotte contributes. The family reunion on Boxing Day, as made possible by Lux, also brings Sophia and Iris closer to each other, against all odds. The novel thus ends on a reconciliatory note, demonstrating that conflict between (seemingly) incompatible outlooks, unavoidable as it is, should neither be exaggerated nor repressed. Rather, the divergence between standpoints and worldviews should be accepted, frustrating as it might be, so as to condition higher levels of harmony in a culture that is enlightened enough to combine empathy with arguing. It is in this way that Smith responds to the present crisis by giving a new, political meaning to Christmas, a point that is

underscored as it is set – in a surprising conclusive shot at Donald Trump – against the shallow praise of Christmas spirit in a recent public statement that once more reflects the wintry bleakness of the POTUS’s mind/heart.

... and beyond

Ali Smith has been accused of not knowing where to end, meaning that *Winter* is more on the lengthy side compared with its predecessor.¹² However, to write a novel that could go on and on is very much in the ‘nature’ of Smith’s writing, her playful and pleasurable endeavour of unpacking values, beliefs and standpoints to present the stories, the twists and turns as well as the still underexplored levels of social interconnectedness that constitute such positions. Recently, the novel has been shortlisted for the Orwell prize for books, which is awarded for outstanding political literature, following George Orwell’s ambition to “make political writing into an art”. *Winter* is just the sixth novel ever to be nominated for the prize which is usually given to non-fiction.¹³ The judges are quite right to recognize that the scope and quality of Smith’s recent writing makes it a remarkable and valuable antidote for anyone frustrated by present-day societies, disorientated and torn as they are between all kinds of actual and imagined crises and the respective

populist and right-wing responses. One can hardly wait to see how Smith's seasonal cycle will blossom in spring and summer.

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8 Smith, *Autumn* 83.

9 Smith, *Autumn* 238

10 Ali Smith, *Winter*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017, 58

11 Smith, *Winter* 317

12 James Wood. "The Power of the Literary Pun". *The New Yorker*, 29 January 2018. <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/29/the-power-of-the-literary-pun>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

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Make English Sweet Again!

Refugee Tales, or How Politics Comes Back to Literature

Dirk Wiemann

(University of Potsdam)

The UK is likely to leave the European Union as the only (ex-)member state that practices the indefinite detention of non-nationals, i.e. immigrants. What is impossible even in Hungary or Slovakia is indeed daily routine in the land that boasts of having given the world *habeas corpus*: in Britain, and only in Britain, is it possible to lock away refugees, migrants and asylum seekers without time limit, sometimes for periods of years, with no indication of when they will be released or when their case will be decided. More often than not, detainees are held in centres profitably operated not by the state, but by multinational corporations, with little transparency or meaningful accountability. The Brook House “immigration removal centre” at Gatwick Airport, for instance, is operated by the multinational G4S corporation on behalf of the Home Office, while Yarl’s Wood, arguably the most notorious of Britain’s ten detention centres, is run by the Serco Group who have recurrently

had to face charges of sexual abuse, unlawful detention of minors and children, and numerous cases of suicide.

Since indefinite detention is a gross violation of international laws, including human rights laws, it should not come as a surprise that the Tory government have repeatedly been obligated and pressed to justify their policy – which they habitually do by outrightly denying that indefinite detention is taking place in Britain at all. Thus when called on by the United Nations in 2016 to ensure that cases of indefinite detention be avoided in future, the Home Office responded by seemingly accepting the recommendation on the basis that indefinite detention doesn’t happen anyway in the country:

although there is no fixed time limit on immigration detention under UK law or policy it operates in line with the established principle that it must not be unduly prolonged and must last for no longer than

is reasonably necessary for the purpose for which it was authorised. (Ben 2015)

Suggesting an ostensible consensus of what is a ‘reasonably necessary’ time period for ‘the purpose’, these conspicuously imprecise wishy-washy formulations deviate widely from the internationally standardised practice of limiting detention without trial to a maximum of 28 days. By contrast, the British regulations enable and indeed encourage authorities to keep individuals in suspension indefinitely under the pretence of ‘necessity’. And while this practice on one hand tends to render asylum seekers invisible (detention and/or removal centres are highly securitized enclosures far removed from urban or even rural centres), it is as such a highly visible component part of the ‘hostile environment’ policy that then home secretary Theresa May programmatically implemented in 2012 - a policy whose most recent outcrop, at the time of writing, was the Windrush scandal culminating in the resignation of Tory Home Secretary Amber Rudd in April 2018. Needless to state, the ‘hostile environment’ programme and especially the practice of indefinite detention have been exposed, criticized and combatted by the parliamentary Left as well as by a wide spectrum of civil society organizations and pressure groups, including the major religious institutions of the country, numerous NGOs and

immigrant/refugee self-help groups.

It has also triggered the Refugee Tales project – a remarkable initiative that aims to raise awareness and combat the practice of indefinite detention with the means of literature, thereby re-asserting the time-honoured but also threadbare claim of literature’s immediate political impact. Refugee Tales offers a forum to rethink and practice literature as active intervention: not just by way of producing politically committed texts but by making the mode and process of the text’s production itself a political statement. In that sense, it could be argued that Refugee Tales marks a veritable return of politics to the field of literature as a social practice.

A Politics of Walking (and Talking)

The Refugee Tales project is the extension of an outreach event annually organized by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group since 2012, namely a three-days group walk intended to publicly express solidarity with migrants and refugees, those who either are involuntarily living a life en route, or worse, incarcerated in the limbo of indefinite detention. It is not for nothing that the organized annual walks habitually take place in the neighbourhood of the infamous Gatwick Detention Centre. In close collaboration with the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the Kent Refugee Help

initiative, literary critic-cum-poet David Herd and activist Anna Pincus developed the idea of the public solidarity walk further and added a literary dimension to the walking manifestation. Modelled on the mythical founding text of EngLit – Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* – the newfangled event combines walking with storytelling and is meant to thereby re-enact and re-appropriate Chaucer’s poem for the immediate present; and perhaps more fundamentally, to reclaim literature as such as an act of sharing and conviviality. In the words of Ali Smith, patron of Refugee Tales:

the telling of stories is an act of profound hospitality. It always has been; story is an ancient form of generosity, an ancient form

that will tell us everything we need to know about the contemporary world. Story has always been a welcoming-in, is always one way or another a hospitable meeting of the needs of others, and a porous artform where sympathy and empathy are only the beginning of things. The individual selves we all are meet and transform in the telling into something open and communal. (Smith 2018)

Setting out from Southwark in a series of walks to Canterbury, a group of participants including asylum seekers, pressure-group activists, writers and sympathisers from all walks of life rehearse the pilgrims’ progress as laid down in Chaucer’s poem. By the mere act of walking, they produce a public and political performance in its own



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right, “crossing part of the country that is integral to a certain sense of English cultural identity, and that is also now the first sight of the UK for those who arrive via the road, rail and ferry routes between Calais and Dover” (White 2017). Clearly the idea is to not just raise awareness about the outrage of indefinite detention but to symbolically and performatively instantiate a solidary and hospitable Britain ‘to come’ as an alternative to Theresa May’s vision of a ‘hostile environment’: “As the project walked [recalls David Herd] it reclaimed the landscape of South England for the language of welcome and everywhere it stopped it was greeted with hospitality and enthusiasm” (“About Refugee Tales” 2018).

The general principle of the project consists of a tandem structure in which the “walk in solidarity” is two things at once: first, a publicly visible manifestation of a community underway not just towards Canterbury but a more welcoming Britain, towards “a better imagined” one as the slogan of the project has it (Refugee Tales 2018); and secondly the occasion to tell and listen to tales en route. It thus is both ‘real’ and ‘symbolic’:

real as the walk is, and acutely real as are the experiences presented in the tales, there is a significant sense in which Refugee Tales is also symbolic. What it aims to do, as it crosses the landscape, is to open up a space: a space in which the stories of people who have been detained

can be told and heard in a respectful manner. It is out of such a space, as the project imagines, that new forms of language and solidarity can emerge. (Herd & Pincus 2017, 115)

It is important to point out that these ‘stories of people who have been detained’ are presented not by these experts-by-experience themselves but by established writers, many of them leading figures on Britain’s literary scene. Therefore it would be misleading to call any of these literary celebrities the authors of these stories; for these stories are not theirs at all. They have instead been told to them beforehand in extensive dialogue by a person immediately affected by or involved in the issue of refuge and detention in Britain: former detainees, asylum seekers, immigrants, lawyers, clergymen, support workers, etc. The tales are in that sense the outcome of a close collaboration between the person whose story it is, and the writer they are working with and who gives that story a specific shape.

Walking in Solidarity

En route, lunch breaks and evening meetings are devoted to events reaching out to the respective local public. These include presentations by experts, concerts by committed sympathisers, scenic readings, or performance lectures, but it is the refugee tales themselves that take centre stage here: modelled on Chaucer’s pre-text (without the

competitive idea inveigled by the host in the *Canterbury Tales*), at each stop during the solidarity walk a tale will be told. True to the etymological derivation of the noun ‘tale’ from the verb ‘to tell’, these stories take place and shape as orature long before they reappear as literature in the conventional sense of that term, i.e. as a fixed written text that can circulate beyond the here and now of the situation of its performance.

In this latter shape, a sample of 25 refugee tales have been collected and published so far in two anthologies (*Refugee Tales* [2016] and *Refugee Tales II* [2017], both edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus for Comma Press). In these volumes, the writer will ideally step back as a mere scribe who records the story told to them by some anonymous but ‘typical’ informant. Hence, *Refugee Tales* comprise stories with such Chaucerian titles as “The Barrister’s Tale”, “The Appellant’s Tale”, “The Deportee’s Tale”, or “The Lorry Driver’s Tale”. While the informants’ individual identities thus dissolve into some generic generality (or protective anonymity), the names of the authors/scribes remain all the more visible: each story’s title is complemented with the identification of the person who processed it into literature: thus, e.g., “The Witness’ Tale as told to Alex Preston”, or “The Unaccompanied Minor’s Tale as told to Inua Ellams”. The list of contributing scribes reads

like a who is who of contemporary progressive British writing in the age of transnational postcolonial globality, including, among others, such leading literary figures as Ali Smith, Jackie Kay, Bernardine Evaristo, or Kamila Shamsie, along with bestseller authors like Helen Macdonald, Chris Cleave or Marina Lewycka, high-profile newcomers like Patience Agbabi and Neel Mukherjee as well as such grey eminences as Marina Warner or Abdulrazak Gurnah. A regular presence is Iain Sinclair, who has so far on each of the solidarity walks acted as on-site guide luring the ‘pilgrims’ into the psychogeography of some eerie sub/urban unknown. In addition, a wide range of writers, artists, actors, musicians and journalists – from Bidisha to Billy Bragg, Jeremy Irons to Ben Okri – have in one way or other contributed to the solidarity walks as moderators, hosts or entertainers and enlarged the impressive (to some: overwhelming, if not forbidding) list of participants archived on the project homepage.

Is the Refugee Tales project, then, an occasion for literary and artsy celebrity to indulge in and promote their own do-gooding? Why else, it could be asked, should the author/scribe become so prominent while the informant tends to disappear in the generic anonymity of ‘the refugee’, ‘the deportee’, ‘the abandoned person’ etc. One obvious reason is certainly the specific vulnerability and

precariousness of many of the informants who present their experience. As David Herd puts it in a recent BBC interview:

right from the beginning, the issue that we faced was that a person who has experienced indefinite detention very much wants that story to be got out and told, but in a good number of cases it's not straightforward for them to be the person to stand up and tell that tale because they are worried about what that might mean in their home countries, and frankly they are worried about what that might mean in relation to the Home Office.

This, to be sure, goes a long way to explain why it is important that the protagonists of the tales should remain anonymous; it does not, however, actually give a reason as to why the writers of the tales should be so highly visible. Is it not an act of appropriation when an author like, say, Jackie Kay not only tells the story of an unnamed 'smuggled person' but figures as the author of that story? It should not be forgotten that for many the author remains the original creative source from which the text at hand has sprung. And is not the slightly antiquated title-subtitle combination, "The Smuggled Person's Tale, as told to Jackie Kay", a most convenient disclaimer to that individualised author's responsibility?

After all, Ms Kay (like any other of the writers involved in the project) only has to stand up to the obligation to faithfully record and process a narrative for whose accuracy and veracity she is in no way whatsoever accountable. I would wish to twist this suspicious and diffident projection against itself and ascertain that, on the contrary, the naming of the scribe has at least three important



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dimensions that are indispensable for the entire project's productivity, especially for the underlying aspiration to repoliticize literature as such:

First, by signposting their names, the contributing writers make themselves accountable not for the empirical veracity of the story told but for the accuracy of the *telling* of the story. This responsibility, to be sure, is of a tiny scale when compared to the task of the person whose testimony the writer processes. And yet, by doing so the writer makes herself

vulnerable to precisely those kinds of accusations that I have anticipated above.

Second, the visibility of the writer's name may be read as an act of speaking in somebody else's stead when that other person is structurally barred from the act of speaking. In this context, the author's name would function in a similar way to that of a guarantor who declares: "By letting this narrative circulate under my name I assume responsibility for it". This is not to be confused with



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the complacency of 'speaking for' that feminists, racially othered, working-class subjects or other marginalized groups have forcefully derided as patronizing; it is exactly in order to prevent such paternalism that the author has to take the risk, however tiny, of exposing herself and her text to personalised scrutiny.

Third, the visible author becomes an identifying device for the average reader. The presence of the author

is in most cases not restricted to the paratextual function institutionalised in the author's name: given the first two layers of this discussion, the scribes of the refugee tales are prone to appear in these stories themselves as the narrators' interlocutors. This does not happen in all the texts but there is a strong tendency towards this kind of dialogism, in which not only the testimony but also its telling and its effect on the listener/scribe gets thematic. Thus, the "Student's Tale as told to Helen Macdonald" is crucially about

the horrific ride as a stowaway in the back of freezer truck; but it is also to some extent an account of the strong inhibitions with which the author/scribe encountered that young refugee. Likewise, the "Detainee's Tale as told to Ali Smith", is both about the outrageous, arbitrary detention-release, re-detention-re-release first-hand experience the storyteller recounts *and* the baffled author's dwindling faith in

the common-sense mantra that "it can't be that bad". In other words, the brief interview is *also* a lesson: "I am an idiot. But I'm learning. A mere hour or two with you in a room and I am about to find out that what I've been being taught is something world-size" ("Detainee", *RT1*, 55). "Something world-size" is something so big that it can't be learned even when it is taught; something that all the same urges to be learned lest we

remain ensnared in the provinciality and insularity of those simplistic – victimizing or demonizing – narratives that produce “easy pigeonholes to fit people who have been forced to take wing” (“Student”, *RT2*, 8). In such passages, I argue, the self-exposed author acts as surrogate reader, unpacking the multifarious tissues of complexity into which the problematic of refuge and asylum appear to be enfolded.

Making English Sweet Again

Such reflexivity and self-absorption, however, is only half of the story. The collection also includes tales about the immediate pragmatics of refugee support work. Among these stories, “The Lorry Driver’s Tale as told to Chris Cleave” takes pride of place as a text that simulates the worldview and diction of a hard-nosed trucker with a UKIP flag on the back wall of his cab, and a taciturn co-driver who claims: “I am a racist, I hate illegals because I love the UK” (29). The tale begins when a liberal journalist (no doubt the identification figure for the average reader) joins the two drivers in their cab a hundred kilometres away from Calais. The journalist’s idea is to collect first-hand material for a feature on the experience of those who navigate the highly policed border to the UK and the crowds of refugees stranded on the Channel coast, to whom the narrator invariably refers as ‘zombies’ to be fended off. Yet in the course of the story

it turns out that the self-declared racist colleague in the pillion seat is in fact a Syrian refugee, and that our ostensibly xenophobic narrator regularly smuggles refugees into the country. These acts of border crossing service, we further learn, are strictly non-profit, ubiquitous and unspectacular. When asked by the journalist about his motivation, the lorry driver gives a surprising explanation: “It’s the kick, isn’t it? To be different inside. Last freedom we’ve got” (34). Helping refugees to cross the border, then, is an act not of charity but of solidarity: not only a support of the imperilled fellow human but also an act of defiant self-assertion and even self-emancipation in a resilient fidelity to ‘the last freedom we’ve got’. A particular strength of this story lies in the way in which its diction itself enacts the kind of trajectory that is its subject matter: it is a move from the language of racism and stereotype to the discovery of the matter-of-fact simplicity of a rhetoric of solidarity and irreducible kindness: “You realise if they [the refugees] have to carry all that, maybe you can take some of the load. You might as well help – life’s over so fast” (“Lorry Driver”, *RT1*, 34). In the same go it is a progress from the degrading representation of the narrator as a dumb chav to his rehabilitation as the political working class subject he actually is – ‘different inside’. In this sense, “The Lorry Driver’s Tale” is tied in very neatly with the programmatic claim of the Refugee

Tales project at large as announced in David Herd's mission statement poem, "The Prologue", that opens volume one of the series. According to this statement, it is the aim of the project shared by all its participants to reclaim a language that has been "rendered hostile by acts of law | So that even friendship is barely possible" to express in it (RT1, ix): "And what we call for | Is an end | To this inhuman discourse" (RT1, x). What is required, instead, is "a whole new language | Of travel and assembly and curiosity | And welcome" (viii). In a shrewd appropriation of that passage from the "Prologue" to the *Canterbury Tales*, where Chaucer introduces the Friar as a speaker who knows how "to make his English sweet upon his tongue", this new language would be an English no longer distorted into the medium of hostile environment propaganda but "made sweet again" (viii) in the act of walking and talking in solidarity.

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