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 demagogy 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**

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