

Editorial

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The title of this issue of *Hard Times* is deliberately ambiguous: “Britain beyond Brexit” can be interpreted both temporally, as an interest in the future after Brexit and, by extension, the history that led to the current situation, but also as a broadening of the scope of discussion, which is all too often exclusively dominated by the ongoing crises of Brexit and now Covid-19, thus losing track of other problems that may contribute to and, in turn, be exacerbated by these crises, such as the ongoing impact of austerity and privatisation. Both the temporal extension and the broadening of perspective potentially denoted by ‘beyond’ were important concerns for the editors of this issue; it turned out, however, that the process of producing the issue came to mimetically resemble the problem it was designed to address: many contributors wanted to write on Brexit and/or Covid-19, while it turned out to be more difficult to find contributors interested in addressing themselves primarily and systematically to the changes undergone by the NHS—even more so after Covid-19 hit. Despite the originally

unintended centrality of Brexit to these pages, the contributions clearly show that Brexit cannot be separated from many wider political questions that are currently at stake not only in Britain, but globally. There is a further respect in which this issue is, itself, symptomatic: there is no agreement, either among contributors, or even among the editorial team, regarding the likely causes, significance, implications, or effects of Brexit, and the relationship in which it stands with other political issues, both in the short and long term. It is therefore filled with multiple dissenting voices. It should be noted, furthermore, that due to difficulties partly related to the Covid-crisis, the contributions to this issue were not all completed at the same time, but at different points throughout the year 2020. Therefore, different vantage points compound the differences in (political) perspective.

The historicising approach of some of the contributions to this issue as well as the multiplicity of perspectives it contains is

evoked by Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) on the issue's cover: the painting was, famously, bought by Walter Benjamin, who, in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), interprets the figure as the angel of history, hurled backwards, by the storm of progress, into an unknown future while keeping its eyes fixed on the ruins of the past. Although it is not clear that it is the storm of progress that has caused the destruction, Benjamin's interpretation of the image is reminiscent of his, perhaps most well-known, dictum that "[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." The ambivalence inherent to Benjamin's theses is further heightened by familiarity with the other meanings he attributed to the painting during the twenty years that he possessed it, from its association with the Cabbalistic belief that new angels are constantly created, some of whom pass out of existence again almost immediately, their sole purpose of being the adoration of G*d, if only for a single instant, to his playful invocation of the figure as 'guardian angel' of the fictitious 'University of Muri'. In the *Acta Muriensa*, Benjamin and his friend Gershom Scholem satirised contemporary academia. Scholem's poem addressed to the angel, "Gruß vom Angelus", ends with a stanza that rejects the possibility of determining the meaning of the image:

Ich bin ein unsymbolisch Ding

bedeute was ich bin

Du drehst umsonst den Zauberring

Ich habe keinen Sinn.

The 'sense' or 'meaning' of the current, multiple crises, of austerity, Brexit, and Covid-19 seems equally difficult to fix – other than, perhaps, in the future, with the benefit of hindsight, from the vantage point of the angel looking backwards, as it were.

The articles in this issue can be read as addressing themselves to three primary concerns: firstly, they undertake to embed the immediate issues into a broader perspective, which relativises their newness and investigates them in contexts that are easily forgotten in the fast-changing environment of the media. Thus, both Andrew Gamble and Logie Barrow, from different disciplinary and political perspectives, read Tory policy during the Brexit negotiations and the Covid-19 crisis as the latest manifestation of strategies, preoccupations, priorities that have long characterised the Conservative Party. At the same time, the imposition of neoliberalism since the 1970s and its intensification since the economic crisis of the late 2000s have exacerbated the effects of policies that are not, in themselves, novel. In thus contextualising and historicising Brexit, Gamble's and Barrow's accounts counterbalance the oft-propagated narrative that Brexit is a direct outcome of the primal xenophobia and racism of the working class. At the same time, we complement the academic discussion of Brexit, austerity and other issues with assessments by an activist (Felicity Dowling) as well as experiential accounts (M. G. Sanchez, Annegret Landgraf and Jennifer Riedel) that provide a counterpoint to the greater abstractions of academic discourse, lest it be forgotten that people's lives are, in many

ways and senses, at stake - albeit opinions on what the best ways to ameliorate their situation may differ.

Secondly, we give room to voices that go beyond some of the ‘orthodoxies’ that have established themselves as part of the discourse both of pro-EU commentators in Britain and that of German observers of British politics. Thus, Sebastian Berg takes issue with many of the criticisms levelled against Corbynism and provides an overall positive assessment of what, he argues, is not an era named after a leader of the Labour Party but a “force in British politics” that continues to take effect as a counterweight to the neoliberal hegemony. Philip Whyman, in turn, makes a case for Brexit from the perspective of a left-wing economist and a founding signatory of the network “The Full Brexit”.

Thirdly, our contributors remind us of the impact of current political developments beyond England as well as beyond Britain, namely in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Here, the conditions of crisis make visible and exacerbate conflicts of interest that pre-existed the current challenges, but that may come to a head in their aftermath. While Annegret Landgraf and Jennifer Riedel draw our attention to the impact of austerity measures on Scottish schools, Klaus Stolz shows how Brexit has revealed the still largely unitary character of the British state and argues that Scotland will sooner or later leave the United Kingdom. The future of Northern Ireland’s place within the state seems equally at stake, as Hofmeister’s account of the developments north of the re-emerging Irish border reminds us. Elena Schmitz

shares her thoughts as “A European in Wales, in times of Brexit”, and some of her observations are echoed in M.G. Sanchez’s autobiographical contribution set in the North of England.

What emerges clearly from this issue of *Hard Times* is that the problems that beset the contemporary conjuncture are closely linked to an entire series of broader political questions, such as the appropriate level of government (local, national, or transnational), the future of the nation state and devolution, the relationship between neoliberal and neoconservative tendencies in contemporary politics, the ongoing impact of austerity and privatisation, the role played by ideology and the media in influencing political developments on the one hand, and the impact of individual personalities like those of Johnson and Corbyn on the other. Although answering such far-reaching questions transcends the scope of a single issue of a magazine, insisting upon their significance in the context of the current crises may, we hope, help to avoid the temptation of well-worn narratives and easy answers.

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