

Soundings critical terms

Conjunctural analysis and the crisis of ideas

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This is a framing statement for a new *Soundings* series
on critical terms for left strategy

There seem to be few certainties in contemporary western politics, and the available resources for understanding the tumult of current events have time and again proved themselves to be inadequate. This is a time of crisis across the political spectrum. It may not - yet - be the end of the long period of neoliberalism in the Anglophone world, but in the Brexit vote and Labour Party civil war in the UK, the rise of left and right populisms in Europe, and the election of Donald Trump in the USA, we can see how the contradictions in neoliberal politics have caused a fracturing of both left and right - destabilising the long accepted 'centre ground' of formal politics.¹

The crisis is lived and felt through changing labour patterns, transformative communications technologies and the disruption of long held ways of life. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than through contemporary migrations, from country to city and across borders and continents. People are moving, demographics are changing and the lived experience of peoples are shifting. These changes produce contradictory responses. Even the utopians who thought digital technologies would usher in a golden age of democracy shudder at the way social media makes visible old hatreds and new prejudices. Gender, race, generation and sexuality are established battlegrounds in the contemporary culture wars happening on and off-line. Climate change is happening around us: we see it in each reading of

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the global temperature. We live in a feverish, restless world: politically, socially, environmentally.

The unfolding crisis is of course material, expressed in increasing inequality, worsening health, economic and environmental instability, and violence, both in dramatic outbursts on the street and strategically by states. But it is also a crisis of ideas - and one that is not unexpected. The loss of trust in traditional institutions as the keepers of collective wisdom, as those institutions have failed to reinvigorate themselves for the challenges of a changing world, has had consequences that have long been anticipated.

Thus, as Alan Finlayson has argued, in the EU referendum conspiracy theory met the trite utilitarianism of the establishment and won.² Conspiracy theories are of course nothing new; what is new is their extent and the depth of their penetration into our cultural and political lives. We see this when senior members of the Conservative Party disavow the role of the expertise on which the credibility of political parties has been based for decades, or when the Republican President's campaign videos reference far-right conspiracy theories about a global elite. When mistrust of 'the system' goes right to the very top, we are in uncharted territory. An intellectual crisis has become visceral, in the same way that the trends traced by charts of global temperatures were translated in Kuwait last summer into 54 degree heat.

This new series of articles, following on from *Soundings Futures* and *The Kilburn Manifesto*, will contribute to the task of making sense of contemporary politics by sharing a set of ideas that we have found essential to our own analysis of politics, including a specific approach to examining and understanding those ideas. Our aim is to give a theoretical and historical introduction to a number of key political ideas, and trace how they have emerged, but also to discuss their relation to political practice, grounding them in empirical examples. We also hope to emphasise pluralism, showing that subtle differences in the ways in which concepts are understood within different contexts and traditions can lead to very different interpretations of the best way to build a better society, but also that these are differences on which critical alliances must be built. We also see the series as an opportunity for writers to think core concepts of left politics anew for this changing world. It will provide a space of left debate for all who are interested in the political - those engaged in lived struggle as well as in the domains of formal politics. While the series was planned before Brexit and Trump, it now seems all the more relevant

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to create an open set of articles that make available some of the intellectual tools that can help us to understand the world - and with which we hope to change it.

Through the conjuncture

Soundings has been grappling with these issues for more than twenty years; its whole focus has been on helping to develop intellectual resources that can be used to understand the best paths forward for left politics. And over the last few years we have particularly foregrounded the idea of conjunctural analysis, which has been central in our response to the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath. This is because thinking in this way involves seeking to identify what is specific to a given historical moment. Does the crisis signify the end of a period of hegemonic dominance by a specific group? Will the economic crisis become a political crisis? What kind of era are we living through? What is the prevailing common sense of this period, and has it been undermined by the crisis? What cultural assumptions underpin the current settlement and can they be challenged?

Exploring what it means to think with 'the conjuncture' - the ideas that inform this kind of analysis, where it comes from and how we use it - therefore seems a useful starting point for setting out the aims of this series. This kind of analysis has enriched and shaped our understanding of neoliberalism. Indeed, we often write of the neoliberal conjuncture - which helps to locate neoliberalism as not simply an economic doctrine or an ideological project of the capitalist super class, but as the result of a series of historical trends, tendencies and intellectual and political movements.

Stuart Hall developed a way of writing that made conjunctural analysis central, through drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci, Italian communist and theorist of the 1920s and 1930s. Gramsci was an historical thinker influenced by the Bolshevik revolution, and grappling with the specificities of the rise of Fascism in Italy, and was seeking to understand big moments in history - the change from feudalism to bourgeois society, from capitalism to communism or fascism, the onset of major wars. He recognised that revolutionary change, as in the Bolshevik revolution - as Lenin himself wrote - 'resulted from a coming together of an extremely unique historical situation', in which 'absolutely dissimilar currents, absolutely heterogeneous class interests, absolutely contrary political and social strivings have

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merged ... in a strikingly “harmonious” manner’.³ For Gramsci the task was to understand the currents within any historical moment, and the nature of the social forces in place, and to create a leadership capable of recognising the opportunity they offered. Understanding the social, cultural and political forces that constitute a given historical moment also became crucial for Gramsci as he tried to analyse the reasons for the defeat of the left in Italy, and to understand that states that had a more robust civil society than that of Tsarist Russia might require different strategies for change. Gramsci is addressing the left, but is also thinking of the right, who can take advantage of conjunctural shifts just as easily, as he learned first-hand in witnessing the rise of his jailer Mussolini.

Today, as Mark Fisher put it, it is ‘easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’. But thinking conjuncturally allows us to historicise the present; and it is through our analysis of the present in all its complexity that we may be able to see the opportunity to take steps towards a new way of organising society.

That said, the *Soundings* project is not to dogmatically ‘follow’ Gramsci. Stuart always emphasised that it was important not to ‘use Gramsci like an old testament prophet’ but to “think” our problems in a Gramscian way’.⁴ Stuart’s practice - largely adopted before he had even encountered Gramsci - was to take in and weave together strands of philosophical and ideological thought, social dynamics and economic developments and think them together with the political terrain of the present. His work would seek to unpick the interplay of different social forces - how cultural preoccupations map onto economic shifts, and how and in what ways these are transfigured in the domain of the political. This was never an abstract analysis but always a political one. When Stuart discovered Gramsci it clarified his approach, and helped crystallise certain ways of thinking, but he did not become a ‘follower’.

Stuart’s analysis of Thatcherism was based on this way of thinking. It enabled him to lay the building blocks for understanding not just the depth of her project - its ambition, its reconfiguration of class alliances, its wide-ranging intellectual and political hinterland - but also to conceive of it as occurring at a specific historical moment, one where the balance of social forces was shifting away from the post-war social settlement and the common sense that had sustained social democracy. In the late 1970s these shifts were seized as an opportunity for intervention by the right. Stuart first developed these ideas extensively in *Policing the Crisis* and his work in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, and he returned to them

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frequently in *Marxism Today* throughout the 1980s.

Stuart's understanding of conjunctural politics under Thatcher was a challenge to deterministic views of the political. He understood that the Thatcherite project did not make the 'new times'. Rather, it saw how to intervene in them to construct a new, populist, political project; it knew how to operate on the new terrain that was unfolding - and how to further shape the terrain to its advantage. Where a meta-narrative such as liberal philosophy would see the steady march of progress towards universal prosperity, or a vulgar Marxism would understand history in terms of the inevitable unfolding of class struggle towards an end point in communism, a conjunctural perspective saw historical change as more contingent, contradictory - and, importantly, open to political actors.

Conjunctural analysis has operated in the work of Stuart, Doreen and Mike in *Soundings* as a kind of meta-framing of the work that needs to be done: it defines a scope and scale for activist political analysis, and includes some core principles. The Gramscian influence nevertheless remains, and the journal offers a space to continue to think with Gramscian ideas (many of which will be explored in detail in this series), including concepts such as hegemony, the national popular and common sense. But our project is also always open to other approaches and modes of thought, and to the influence of other spheres of influence.

There are four key ways that thinking conjuncturally can be of assistance to the left: it offers a means of analysis of periods of conjunctural crisis and contradiction; it is an *a priori* necessity for effective political intervention (albeit often in other places under other signs); it operates as a space open to bringing together longer trajectories of thought; and it enables reflection on the shifting forces of socio-political histories. These four aspects will help to shape the future direction of this series. Although individual articles within the series may not be explicitly identified as conjunctural analysis, these priorities will shape the manner in which we see the series progressing, and point to the sort of content we will encourage from contributors.

Analysing periods of crisis

Conjunctural analysis as a means of historical periodisation places special emphasis on crisis as a driving force of history. This makes it of obvious utility as we continue moving through a long period of uncertainty emerging out of the 2007-8 crisis.

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We are aware that significant change happens in moments of rupture - there is the potential for movement between one settlement and the next at times when the existing tendencies of a society (for instance the unsustainable reliance on debt to fuel consumption) exhaust their possibilities for renewal, and a new organisation of social forces is required.

The movement from the post-war social democratic settlement - characterised by a strong labour movement, high taxation and an overbearing but socially orientated state - to the neoliberal era - characterised by low taxation, a weak labour movement and a privatised interventionist state - has been the classic case study of conjunctural analysis. The shift between the two is the result of the rupturing of the post-war order, when the right won the battle that ensued from the crisis of capitalist profitability, and undid the socio-economic settlement that had underpinned the social democratic period. A key argument of conjunctural analysis is that there was nothing inevitable about neoliberalism following these developments. Stuart and other writers in *Marxism Today* in the 1980s were at pains to identify the manner in which Thatcherism took advantage of the contradictions of the crisis, and actively put in place a new set of (albeit contradictory, partial and contingent) alliances to establish the hegemony of neoliberal thought and governance in the UK.

Here is Stuart writing in 1979 - shortly before Thatcher's election victory - describing the efforts made by the right to maintain establishment rule in the face of structural change:

If the crisis is deep - 'organic' - these efforts cannot be merely defensive. They will be formative: a new balance of forces, the emergence of new elements, the attempt to put together a new 'historical bloc', new political configurations and 'philosophies', a profound restructuring of the state and the ideological discourses which construct the crisis and represent it as it is 'lived' as a practical reality; new programmes and policies, pointing to a new result, a new sort of 'settlement' - 'within certain limits'. These do not 'emerge': they have to be constructed. Political and ideological work is required to disarticulate old formations, and to rework their elements into new configurations. The 'swing to the Right' is not a reflection of the crisis: it is itself a response to the crisis.⁵

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The crisis of the 1970s ultimately led to a reassertion of the dominance of capital that had existed prior to the Second World War, after a thirty-year period when it had been moderated by the age of social democracy. It was a movement from one period of capitalism to another, characterised by a different social settlement. There were changes in the manner in which social and political leadership was attained, and a new organisation of coercion (for example against trade unions, black youth and travellers) and consent (through consumption, choice and possibilities for private accumulation); throughout the 1980s the Thatcher project continued to take advantage of new opportunities for reconfigured hegemonies. When the Thatcherite project was exhausted, Blairism emerged to take its place: the dominance of neoliberal ideas has not occurred naturally; it has been continually worked for as opportunities have arisen and new coalitions have been secured as dominant. Think, for instance, of the rise of the alliance between the tech-sector and financial services as the dominant economic forces over the last two decades.⁶

Conjunctural analysis enables a deeper perspective on such changes, and challenges a narrower focus on the day-to-day dramas of the political mainstream; it looks to the organisations of power blocs, the relation between the cultural, economic, political and social, and at the ideas and institutions that sustain them and the relationships between them. Ideally, it is a form of analysis that helps the left to respond to moments of crisis with innovative programmes and alliances, and an understanding of the potential of current social and political forces. This is, of course, an extremely difficult task.

The Brexit result, disastrous as it seems to many of us, needs a response based on this kind of analysis, but instead we have been rendered almost at a standstill by a Parliamentary Labour Party that is focused nearly exclusively on dated electoral logics, and a Corbyn leadership that was unprepared for its capture of the party and has been forced into defensive manoeuvres for the near entirety of the time since it won (the first) leadership election. There seems to be nothing in place in the Labour Party that is capable of responding to this rupturing of the political terrain, or of building new alliances or formulating strategic intervention for the left (and indeed there is not much of a hint of an outline of what that might be). Instead, this again looks like a moment where forces of the right, once again in a new configuration, will take the opportunity to reorganise British capitalism in their interests.⁷

As Philip Mirowski, Naomi Klein and others have noted, it is the right's ability to

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take advantage of crises that has enabled them to progress their politics over the last forty years. This is because crises can change the underlying equilibrium of different social formations, often in dramatic ways. Moreover, a crisis cannot simply be understood as a moment of shock; rather, it is usually the culmination of a number of ongoing processes, a time when the organisation of different elements in a society no longer seem to be coherent, but instead to jar, and they reveal themselves to have been long moving in contradictory directions.

Whatever the case, at each of these moments of potential rupture of the neoliberal settlement, the right has been able to deepen, or at least to maintain, its hold. This is partly the result of a failure of left organisation and thought, and a lack of preparedness for the contingency of crisis. Some organisations are working hard to ensure that this is less likely to be the case in the future, but we would argue that a strong conjunctural analysis is an essential element in this work. There are grounds for hope here - for example concepts like post-capitalism as espoused by Paul Mason, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams show a potential way forward in their demands for a post-work society, especially if combined with work on gender and care such as outlined in Nancy Fraser's feminist critique of capitalist political economy or Mike Rustin's *Kilburn Manifesto* chapter on the relational society. At present, however, the ideas around post-capitalism are important and promise much, but are insufficient for a fully-fledged politics; they lack a purchase on the broad terrain and instead build an analysis from the positions of emergent activist movements. They speak little to a wider society that is becoming defensive in its outlook and, in many of the traditional spaces of the British left, retrenching to closed identities.

Analysis for political intervention

As should by now be clear, conjunctural analysis has a different sensibility from mainstream analysis, either academic or journalistic. It is, before anything else, concerned with understanding the present moment strategically, with the purpose of exposing fault lines and suggesting tactical interventions for the left (while seeking to avoid the all too common resort to oversimplification, or post-hoc justification for existing ideological positions). The idea is to look at anything that might be relevant for understanding how current political and social forces - parties, movements,

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identities and shared histories - are arrayed; including what alliances underpin the dominance of the ruling group; or how leadership in society is justified or maintained through both coercion and consent.

Though you would never guess this from reading the mainstream press, politics is never a simple question about the personnel involved, the leader of this party or that - although who they are and what they represent to people is of course important. Understanding the balance of forces means looking beyond personalities to focus on questions such as shifts in social allegiances and the processes that underpin these, for example the decline of unions, the emergence of the environmental movement, the changing nature of feminist politics. It involves identifying the stumbling blocks to effective action, as well as new opportunities created by changing alliances. This was the aim of the *Kilburn Manifesto* - to map the terrain of neoliberalism in order to better understand how to act politically. Here we seek a deeper engagement with specific ideas that can inform action.

Thus to make sense of an EU without Britain, and a Britain without the EU, requires some practical exploration of what those relationships will look like and how this transnational divorce will reshape the lives of peoples on both sides of the channel. But it also requires us to revisit broader questions of identity and nation; democracy and the media; power, domination and liberty - and in a context where we must look backwards to what has gone before as well as forwards to the world we want to see. It is not enough just to look at the opportunities that arise in the splits amongst the Conservative Party, or the obstacles presented by Labour's internecine squabbles: we need to understand how the EU referendum made visible to us rifts in the ways people understand society, whether that is based on long recognised ones, such as between the north and south, old and young, rich and poor, the long-settled and the more recently arrived, or emergent ones such as the splits within the working and middle classes that revealed just how deep the challenges brought by globalisation have become and how they are unevenly configured around some of the older divisions.

Blue Labour represented an attempt to read the present moment in this way, though there were some serious problems in the conclusions arrived at by its main thinkers. Nevertheless, Blue Labour did try to speak to something very real in our political environment - the widespread feeling among large sections of the population of being marginalised in a rapidly changing world; and the need to

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conceive of, not just an electoral alliance amongst different social groups to take Labour to power in this emerging terrain, but a language and a philosophy to help build an equivalent intellectual and political hinterland to that which Thatcher (and indeed Tony Blair) had created for their politics. Blue Labour presented a serious attempt to build a majoritarian politics to challenge neoliberalism, and the European referendum results gave some credence to their perspective.

However, the flaws in this political and social constellation were only too apparent. Rather than confront the prejudices of the groups that they sought to incorporate in this new alliance, they gave them a heightened prominence. Anxieties about immigration, shifting gender relations and welfarism were not challenged and reappraised in the light of a more robust analysis of social change under neoliberalism, but magnified in soundbites that emerged in the daily press. A project that grew out of community organising ended up simply reproducing the conservative attitudes it encountered, in a manner not dissimilar from that of the mainstream parties who so frequently resort to the technocratic device of focus groups as a means to guide policy. This replaced any sense of the need to challenge dominant common sense. A sophisticated analysis and promising project was cut short by a New Labour-type obsession with repeating back to people what Blue Labour's advocates thought they wanted to hear. From coverage in the *Daily Mail* to interviews on Radio 4, what was heard was not the sophisticated thinking that sat behind the project, but a jingoism and sexism that played to the worst tendencies of the right-wing press. Instead of challenging neoliberalism, it appeared to reinforce the worst side of its cultural agenda.

The Blue Labour project also presented a form of political intervention that was missing an essential component in its analysis - the role of the Labour Party as a membership organisation. It failed to bring party members with it. And for good reason. Instead of working with and through the dominant values of Labour activists, it challenged them on core principles: attacking trades unions, multiculturalism and welfare while asserting the primacy of family and nation over the social and the state. A strategy of challenging party activists was healthy, but this crossed the line into alienating them from the project.

We know the flag and family rhetoric works in electoral terms: it is partly what has driven Brexit and Trump's presidential campaign. But - leaving issues of solidarity and justice to one side for the moment - the left would embrace such a

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frame at a far greater cost than the forces of the right. But Blue Labour represented more than crass reactionary thinking, and the shame is that at its core were some of the kinds of thinking that good conjunctural analysis requires: an understanding of shifts in the cultural, social and economic terrain that addressed what sorts of groups were being constructed, how alliances could be built between the marginalised and the middling, and how these groups could be mobilised to take power for a more equal, just and humane society.

And this is a salutary lesson for those of us engaged in this kind of thinking: getting the analysis right is a tricky business. The sheer amount of effort - by multiple actors across a number of years and through different organisations - to get the Blue Labour project off the ground was immense. Likewise, its failure occupied the intellectual and political energies of a number of significant political leaders and thinkers for a long time, at the expense of the emergence of alternative formations; and at the same time it made visible new rifts within the left. Blue Labour thus represents a cautionary tale - and is now largely a lesson from history.⁸

The present in history: unfolding trajectories

Serious political analysis has to include a recognition of the importance of history in orienting ourselves within the present and finding productive routes into the future. This is particularly pertinent for new activists, who may not be aware of the political struggles in the past with which their campaigns have much in common, and may be unfamiliar with the idea of placing their activism within an understanding of past struggles.

Looking at current crises within an overly narrow time frame can lead us in unhelpful directions. One risk is that an analysis of the Labour Party's recent paroxysms that starts with the 2010 election results - or worse, those from 2015 - may lead back to a cautious 'soft left' Milibandism. Even if this kind of approach was likely to be able to command a majority in 2020, if it is looked at in the context of decades of decline of social democracy across Europe it is obvious that it could only ever be a short-term fix. Similarly, commentary on the EU referendum which starts with the campaigns and asks how a 2 per cent swing towards remain could have flipped the result will only find false solutions to the wrong problem. If Brexit is seen as an expression of long-term disillusionment and alienation from political

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institutions, it is clear that a narrow vote for remain would only have deferred recognition of these trends, rather than resolved them.

This need to place a greater value on history may meet resistance in some quarters, given that much of contemporary activism is often remarkably ahistorical. New groups and formations that become politicised around particular issues often replicate a 'year zero mentality' (as Jeremy Gilbert calls it), which rejects established groups, including political parties, as obstacles to new kinds of organising and activism, preferring to start from scratch. High-energy, high-profile actions, facilitated by new media technologies, can often channel that energy in exciting and apparently impactful ways.⁹ But such victories are hard to sustain, and the groups themselves are often very short-lived. Some of the collectives assembled during the student occupations of 2010-11 didn't even survive into the following academic year, sometimes simply because the lack of formal structures meant that basic infrastructure such as passwords and email lists were lost.

For some, this lack of engagement with history is an explicit element of their politics, linked to non-hierarchical organising and anti-intellectualism, and interpreting a lack of connection to existing groups as a mark of being truly radical. For most, it is a problem of omission, where there appears to be no relevant tradition or history to attach themselves to. Our (mainly Deborah's) personal experience of this was within the climate movement of the early 2000s. Given that climate change is a genuinely new issue with certain unprecedented characteristics, it seemed reasonable (on the face of it) to disavow previous forms of left organising, particularly trade unionism - with much of its base in extractive and high carbon industries - and to label them as part of the problem. In addition, new media technologies and platforms were enabling us to organise and communicate in seemingly novel ways. Some major wins, for example, around stopping a third runway at Heathrow, seemed to confirm that we had cracked a new formula for creating change and had no need of older forms of organising.

This bubble burst after the failure of the 2009 COP talks in Copenhagen, which were followed swiftly by the 2010 Coalition government and the start of austerity. With the dissipation of energy within the movement and a new sense of powerlessness, we began to recognise that fast-paced networked organising was not adequate for addressing the deeper structural problems of which climate change is a particular manifestation. A more sophisticated history of climate change as an

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intersectional issue linked to other forms of oppression had to be taken on board. And the unacknowledged importance of past movements, even within our own apparently ahistorical ways of organising, started to become clearer, including the influence of those involved in the roads protests of the 1990s on the formation of Climate Camp. These histories were hard to trace because the year zero mentality itself was one of the most robust elements to be transmitted between, say, anti-capitalist protesters of the late 1990s and the climate movement ten years later. But the effects of these relationships - on attitudes to the mainstream media, for example - were nonetheless substantial.

And histories matter, because, even if you consider yourself not to have one, continuities with the past almost always do exist, and are apparent to others. For those of us entering into environmental politics through climate change, resistance from trade unions appeared to stem from the backward-looking defence of industrial jobs - whereas, from another perspective, our devaluing of skilled manual labour was just the latest manifestation of the problematic class history of the environmental movement. Without appreciating the reasons for distrust on both sides, the immense amount of work needed to build alliances - such as those that led to the Put People First march, where trade unionists marched for the first time for climate jobs - can be all too easily dismissed.

There are signs that this anti-institutionalism is being superseded - even before the surge in membership of the Labour Party associated with Corbyn, the youth membership of the Green Parties and SNP was swelling. As Adam Ramsay wrote before the 2015 election, young people seem to be breaking with long-term trends by joining organisations in large numbers. Part of the success of harnessing that energy will depend on whether those institutions can formulate and transmit their histories and ideologies to this new membership, for many of whom this may be their first interaction with a group that has any commitment whatsoever to longevity.

A conjunctural perspective locates these trends within longer moments and movements and shifts. Identifying the way in which intersecting histories help to shape political consciousness is important. Growing up under neoliberalism produces its own subjectivities: the generational change that Karl Mannheim identified as the 'fresh contacts' of young people who reach political maturity at a specific moment in history must be thought anew; there is a need for longer histories to connect to and work within. Thus, within this series we will be emphasising the

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way in which current ideas link to longer-term debates, and the extent to which the present is a product of histories of the past; our discussion will be informed by an understanding of the present as a palimpsest of different generations of political formation - though each conjunctural crisis produces its own political subjects.

A space for generative ideas

Finally, and most significantly for the launch of this series, conjunctural analysis is 'about deep structural movements', as Doreen Massey wrote in one of her *Soundings* contributions.¹⁰ Doreen's writing emphasised the importance of a wide understanding of what constitutes politics, and of the necessity of incorporating into political analysis culture and geography, the economy and identity, common sense and ideology. In this context Althusser was an important thinker for Doreen, particularly his understandings of ideology and 'over-determination';¹¹ the idea of over-determination helped her to think through connections, especially in relation to feminism and post-colonial theory. David Featherstone's recent *Soundings* article exploring the relationship between hegemony and place was located within Doreen's path-breaking approach to the importance of place in politics, and is a good example of the ways in which the ideas of previous thinkers can help and inform new work, in this case on devolution and regional and national identifications.

Lawrence Grossberg has suggested that thinking the conjuncture requires us not just to incorporate the insights of key philosophical and critical thinkers, but to work with whole disciplines such as economics or political science. It also means bringing in elements outside the immediate Marxist traditions of leftist thought, and hence decentering white male thought, looking for alternative ways of thinking the present from, for example, the intersectional black feminism of bell hooks, post-colonial insights from Frantz Fanon, or the techno-feminism of Donna Haraway. Jo Littler has pointed to the ways in which this borrowing from other traditions has helped develop a strong line of conjunctural analysis within feminist cultural studies, in particular the landmark book *Off-Centre*.¹²

But this desire to be broad and interdisciplinary in the resources we draw on for our analysis also involves understanding how earlier ideas are essential to and imbricated in contemporary political frames. For instance, Stuart argued that classical eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberal ideas are essential for the

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functioning of neoliberalism; indeed, neoliberalism contains the populist promise that everyone can be the free, property-owning Englishman of classic liberal thought.¹³ Understanding how these forms of thought are imbricated deep within our culture helps us to find ways of challenging them.

This openness to a wide range of ideas means that we are not tied to a disciplinary perspective. And in the current moment it may well be that elements of liberal philosophy can be retrieved in looking for new directions for the left - even if that means, for example, working to disentangle its reliance on implicitly patriarchal forms of property transmission from more general ideas about the liberation of individuals. Likewise, it may be that through understanding better the internal logics of markets we will be better placed to disentangle their atomising effects from their role in allocating goods and services (through co-operative forms of ownership for instance). A politics built out of a conjunctural analysis works on the terrain of the possible, and ideas that help build that politics, so long as they are continuously and rigorously checked against core values, can be drawn from any available place. The problems arise (see Blue Labour above) when a putative hegemonic project overturns those values.

The ongoing project

The aim of this series is to find, rework and contextualise the ideas that we can use for a conjunctural analysis. We intend it to be a living, ongoing project, and no doubt the principles set out here will be revised and adapted as it progresses. But the aims are clear: to develop a rich toolkit of concepts, histories and understandings that enable us to think through what is possible, to determine the direction of future interventions, and to provide a space in which crucial differences and agreements within left activism can be explored.

We hope to provide a basis from which an effective left strategy can be debated and formulated, and one that will allow old hands and fresh faces to find common language and shared priorities for the tasks ahead. As such the topics we are proposing are provisional, and we welcome further suggestions for contribution as the project develops. But we will address themes such as: hegemony and digital politics; generation and intersectionality; the secular and modernity; technologies and society; class, work and labour; the national popular; ecologies and economies;

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place and protest; bodies and emotions.

The aim is for these themes to speak to each other and the wider project in ways which help to illuminate the terrain of the present conjuncture; and we hope that they are not just generative of further ideas, but can become the basis of effective action.

Deborah Grayson and **Ben Little** are members of the *Soundings* editorial collective.

Notes

1. To indicate a few of those contradictions in neoliberalism: the production of competitive 'winner takes all' subjectivities that figure most people as losers; the fuelling of consumption by debt rather than redistribution while moralising about living within our means; and the failure to efface cultural differences in favour of rational choice while deploying rhetorics of diversity and equality.
2. See www.opendemocracy.net/uk/alan-finlayson/too-many-facts-and-not-enough-theories-rhetoric-of-referendum-campaign
3. Lenin, *Letters from Afar* No 1, cited in Stuart Hall, 'The great moving right show', reprinted in *Hall Selected Political Writings*, Lawrence & Wishart 2017.
4. Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci and Us', *Marxism Today*, June 1987, available at: http://www.banmarchive.org.uk/collections/mt/pdf/87_06_16.pdf
5. 'Great moving right show', p15.
6. See Jeremy Gilbert, 'Disaffected Consent: That post-democratic feeling', *Soundings* 60, summer 2015.
7. We are not suggesting that Brexit was ever going to be a positive opportunity for the left to further some sort of organic change towards socialism along the lines of the Lexit arguments. Our argument is that if there was an opportunity here - even for small scale advantage in what Gramsci called a 'war of manoeuvre' - in the day-to-day fall out immediately following Brexit, there was nothing in place to take advantage of it. But it is for these kinds of moments,

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however awful they appear on the surface, that there must be some sort of preparedness.

8. That Blue Labour has not simply vanished, but has been reconstituted in a different form with new personnel (see Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst, *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics*, I. B. Tauris 2015), speaks to how it effectively captured something about the shifting cultural and social milieu. However, this grouping is no longer the insurgent force that characterised its previous incarnation.

9. Incorporating techno-social changes into conjunctural analysis is complex, but crucial. There is a competing discourse of techno-determinism, which places high value on the emergence of digital media for political campaigning. Social media are, undeniably, an important component of the current crisis, but to over-invest in them is to give them a political status that is potentially misleading. Digital communications technologies are not exclusive of older forms of communication, nor do they have an intrinsic political orientation. That said, it is important that this techno-social terrain is incorporated into an analysis, as articles in this series will demonstrate.

10. Doreen Massey, 'Ideology and economics in the present moment', in Sally Davison and Katherine Harris (eds), *The Neoliberal Crisis*, Lawrence and Wishart 2015, p102.

11. Over-determination refers to the idea that events are rarely determined by a simple single cause, but are instead determined by a fusion of multiple processes and contradictions, each of which nevertheless retains its own specific forms of effectivity.

12. Jo Littler, 'Consumer Culture and Cultural Studies' in D. Shaw, A. Chatzidakis, and M Carrington (eds), *Ethics and Morality in Consumer Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Routledge 2016.

13. Stuart Hall, 'The Neoliberal Revolution', in *The Neoliberal Crisis*, p20.