

## **The Roots of Populism: Neoliberalism and working-class lives**

Brian Elliott

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Since the United Kingdom Brexit referendum of 2016 and particularly after the General Election of 2019, journalists, political scientists and sociologists have been examining the seismic political shifts that led to a number of once solid Labour seats returning Conservative Members of Parliament to the House of Commons. This has been viewed by many as part of a wider crisis for social democracy in general and the socialist left in particular across the European continent. Comparisons can also be made with the rise of populism in the United States, and the ways in which the Donald Trump presidency gained the support of working-class voters in deindustrialised communities.

Brian Elliott's book on populism and working-class lives is written by a philosopher with a keen sense of the history and the post-war political culture that led to electoral victories for the Labour Party in 1945, 1950, 1964, 1966, 1974 and 1997. The author's parents grew up in Liverpool and lived through the ravages of Thatcherism and the impact that Conservative policies had on the city in the 1980s. I read the autobiographical passages with special interest, as I was coming of age in the same period on the other side of the Wirral Peninsula in a coal-mining village in Wales. I share much of Elliot's views here on the fragmentation of the relationship between the Labour Party and its traditional electoral base in the 2000s, but I have reservations about his optimistic reading of populism and its viability for a socialist or indeed social democratic renewal of British popular culture.

The text analyses the causes of populism and the failure of the Labour Party in responding to the problems of post-industrial communities. Contrary to much conventional characterisations of recent events, Elliot claims that 'populism should not be seen, at base, as a threat to but rather as a resurrection of modern democratic culture' (p. 2). There is a justifiable critique of Tony Blair's New Labour project, but the party did win substantial majorities in 1997, 2001 and 2005. Moreover, the argument that Labour was not adequately representing the working-class is something that the socialist left has been claiming since at least the 1930s. The major lacunae here is the fact that in 2019 the socialist leadership of Jeremy Corbyn catastrophically failed to bring working-class voters back to Labour in the kind of constituencies that formed the bedrock of the party.

The mapping of the rise of a labour culture across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that forms the chronological spine of the book is impressive, but in places lacks nuance and complexity. For example, the fragility and brittle nature of the Labour vote in a city like Liverpool is too often overlooked. The party did not have a majority on the City Council until the 1950s or the majority of its MPs until the mid-1960s. In the Brexit referendum, both Liverpool and the neighbouring Labour city of Manchester voted to remain in the European Union and did not follow the populist path of some of the deindustrialised towns on their periphery. The dominant factor fuelling populism in a range of former Labour heartlands was race and migration and the book devotes very little space to unpacking and explaining this process. The populism that led to the Brexit vote and the electoral defeats of Labour were largely English. Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain and in Wales, the party has held on to votes in recent local council and assembly elections. In the 2019 General Election, the party lost parliamentary seats in constituencies close to the English border (Delyn) or those that had a recent history of English in-migration (Vale of Clwyd).

The link made throughout the text between ‘an unsatisfied desire ... for democratic accountability’ (p. 14) and the rise of populism never really addresses how such an impulse was underpinned by long-held racialized views shaped by the legacy of the British Empire. Both the Conservative Party and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) capitalised on this and exploited the views of sections of the white working-class. Such a strategy was crucial in delivering former industrial constituencies to the Conservatives. This is not to say that race, migration and English national identity were the only factors at play here. However, when voters were given the opportunity to opt for the kind of Labour Party in 2019 that could meet ‘the demands of a working class electorate subjected, over the last four decades, to the rigours of unrelenting neoliberal governance’ they voted for Conservative (p. 29).

The substantive chapters are a tour-de-force talking the reader through the seminal works of historians and social theorists. Drawing on some of the giants of the post-war academic left such as E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams there is a strong elegiac feel to the narrative that tends to obscure the complexity of shifting working-class identities in post-industrial localities, metropolitan/urban centres and the constituent nations of the UK. It draws rather too heavily on the research of Matthew Goodwin and others who claim to have a special insight into the politics of the working-class. The idea of the ‘intergenerational experience that retains a consistent “structure of feeling” despite all variations of place and time’ also needs to be qualified. From the vantage point of 2022, England is a country where inter-generational connections to a socialist path have been largely broken. Recent research by Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford on post-industrial constituencies suggests that the Labour vote will continue to decline.

The rise of English populism since 2010 was perhaps not driven by a desire for a new form of socialist democracy, but something much less progressive. It could ultimately divide the working class on racial, national, and ethnic lines rather than creating a vehicle for the renewal of democracy. The political trajectory of a pop culture icon that the author notes for having a formative impact on how he viewed the world from the perspective of a northern working-class teenager is indicative. Stephen Morrissey as singer of the seminal English rock band The Smiths went from playing benefit shows for striking miners in 1984 to by 2020 openly supporting the anti-immigrant far-right For Britain party.

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