

**The Instabilities of Expertise: remaking knowledge, power and politics in unsettled times.**

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**Abstract:**

In this article, we explore the implications of contemporary populist challenges to established forms of expertise in the UK, USA and elsewhere. Drawing on a Foucauldian conception of knowledge and power as always articulated, we argue for a conjunctural approach to understanding the ways in which formations of expertise become stabilized and de-stabilized, vulnerable to challenge and contestation. We trace the role of economic expertise in defining the limits of political and policy 'realism' before and after the crash of 2007-8. We then consider the rise of nationalist-populist political mobilizations which challenged existing 'expertise' in the name of popular wisdom. In the context of de-stabilized forms of expertise, we ask about emergent attempts at reconfiguring knowledge, power and politics in different ways.

**Keywords:** expertise, power, knowledge, conjuncture, populism, austerity, articulation,

In this paper we challenge the idea of expertise as formed of distinct and coherent sets of knowledges, capacities and skills. Rather we view it as a condensate in which particular formations of knowledge and power are configured. Further, we explore the complex and shifting relationships between this conception of expertise and the field of politics. Drawing on the recent trajectory of the United Kingdom (UK), though with references to other settings, we trace the dominance of particular modes of expertise – articulated around the economy – as central to the construction of the policy and politics of austerity. We then consider contestations of this dominant framing, in particular the outbreaks of populist disaffection visible in the UK, parts of Europe and North America. Such mobilizations seek to install understandings of ‘the people’ as a collective moral subject, creating a politics played out through differently articulated claims to authority. These populist challenges have identified ‘experts’ as the embodiment of elite power and domination, to be challenged in the name of popular sentiment and wisdom. We argue that this points to the value of a *conjunctural* understanding of expertise. In this, we draw on a form of analysis developed in cultural studies that treats specific forms of expertise as articulated formations active – both activated and activating – in particular configurations of time-space. Such formations move between moments of stabilization as the dominant modes of knowing and instability as they become vulnerable to challenge and contestation (see, *inter alia*, Clarke, 2010; Clarke and Newman, 2017; Grossberg, 2010; Hall and Massey, 2010). We show how configurations of knowledge and power are always contingent and contested, producing conditions of instability. We consider to what extent challenges to established expertise displace them, and ask whether there are emergent formations that might constitute new alignments of knowledge, power and politics.

This paper works with a Foucauldian view of knowledge as always entangled with power, rather than a conception of expertise as a free-floating cluster of knowledge, capacities and skills. Foucault insisted that knowledge is never separate from the dynamics of power, and never able to transcend the social formations in which it is active. In *Discipline and Punish*, he argued that: ‘There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations’ (1991: 27). This provides a foundation for critical work on forms of

expertise and here we take up its promise for thinking about the current political conjuncture in which economic expertise has occupied a central role – most evidently providing the legitimating rationale for the politics and policies of austerity. However, as we show, since 2008 the power-knowledge nexus of economic expertise has been characterized by a series of instabilities and contestations that predated the current eruptions of populist styles of politics. To this Foucauldian conception of power/knowledge, we add our *conjunctural* view of formations of expertise, recognizing that such formations are always particular to specific moments of time-space, rather than being universal in either dimension (Clarke, forthcoming a). Such formations are constructed, acquire their legitimacy, and become institutionalized in assemblages of agents, practices, and technologies. But their claims to universality - to being viewed as natural or normal – also come to be challenged or contested at particular times and in particular places. One such moment was the populist challenge to the seemingly hegemonic power of the economic expertise in the period of austerity governance in the UK.

### **Configuring knowledge and power: the expertise of austerity.**

Since the financial crisis of 2007-8, the governmental space of the EU has been dominated by austerity policies, marking the triumphant recovery of neoliberal economic expertise from brief challenges to its legitimacy (see, *inter alia*, Davies, 2016; Evans and McBride, forthcoming; Forkert, 2017; Varoufakis, 2017). Economics, economists and economic expertise-centred institutions (from credit ratings agencies to the International Monetary Fund) had failed to anticipate the crisis of the financial sector and its global effects. This produced a brief moment in which political denunciations of capitalism appeared. But ‘austerity’, rather than challenging conventional economic wisdom, marked its return: national governments and supra-national institutions insisted that a crisis of public debt, largely engendered by ‘bailing out’ failing financial institutions, required tough measures to restore financial and fiscal confidence. Like many others, we view this neoliberal dominance of the ‘economic’ as a distinctive formation of knowledge and power; other versions of economic expertise, for example those that acknowledged questions of care, environmental harm or the costs of inequality, were subordinated or erased. It was a stripped down form of economics – one readily aligned with austerity as a political project – that became

institutionalized in diverse apparatuses, from think tanks to popular media (see, *inter alia*, Brown, 2015; Davies, 2016; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009, Peck, 2010).

Establishing this space of 'the economic' creates the conditions for things called 'economies' to be imagined in ways that subordinated of the field of 'the social' to the economy's projected needs, logics and dynamics. Appeals to economic necessity were combined with claims about moral virtue, presenting austerity as a means of combining the economic necessity of discipline (and self-discipline) with a moral economy of 'fairness' (Clarke forthcoming b; Clarke and Newman, 2012). This separation of the economy – what Polanyi called its 'disembedding' - is the result of political-cultural work, and is profoundly significant for how social formations are imagined and acted upon (Grossberg, 2010; Peck, 2013; Polanyi, 1944). What is significant is the *de-politicizing* character of this discourse of economic necessity: the insistence that economic imperatives (recovery, growth, competitiveness, etc.) override or even short-circuit political calculation or choice. For example, Davies argues that the 'basic assumption that all action is principally economic action is common to all neoliberal styles of theory.... This effects a collapse of the separate logics of market, society and state, using the language and techniques of the former to enact a blanket economic audit of all three' (2016: 21-22; see also Brown, 2015). Neoliberalism in this sense is both anti-democratic and anti-political, seeking to substitute an apparently neutral logic of decision-making (market-like in its calculations) for political contest and debate. In the process, party political competition came to centre on the question of economic management: who could be trusted to best manage the economy and its needs? Dominant voices belonged to central banks, investment brokers, and supranational organizations – all understood as apolitical – who could simultaneously advise on, judge and evaluate governmental action.

This knowledge/power nexus was enshrined in the workings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Union (EU), most visibly in the imposition of austerity policies on so called 'debtor' nations such as Greece. It was also visible in the ways in which national governments – particularly the Cameron/Osborne regime in the UK – sought to legitimize austerity as a fundamental

priority of governing. This inculcated a particular conception of ‘realism’ as a disciplinary political and policy device that attempted to control the boundaries of the ‘thinkable’. It underpinned the proclaimed ‘necessity’ of particular courses of action (e.g., public spending cuts, service closures and the rolling back of state-provided welfare). And it was associated with a particular form of technocratic governance – a mode of governing that emphasizes the primacy of ‘expert’ interventions rather than influence by political parties and the citizens they seek to represent. This conception of ‘realism’ was not new: for instance, in the UK, Thatcherite conservatism was often expressed in the TINA claim (There Is No Alternative) while the Blair governments were noted for their emphasis on ‘what counts is what works’, an approach that promised a new science of policymaking that privileged research-based notions of ‘evidence’ and that instituted a plethora of managerial technologies, audit regimes, action plans and ‘expert’ templates (see, for example, Cabinet Office, 1999; Clarke and Newman, 1997; Davies et al, 2000; Newman, 2002).

Critical work has tended to elide such practices into more generalized and generalizing narratives – of globalization, neo-liberalism and de-politicization. We have some reservations about the totalizing character of such accounts: they tend to underestimate the amount of political work necessary to de-politicize governing in this way; they tend to a rather narrow (and established) view of politics and the political, and they tend to a rather unilinear and epochal view of historical development (Dean, 2014; Newman, 2017). More particularly, we have been troubled by rather deterministic accounts of the relationship between the hegemonic power of economic expertise and the ‘depoliticization’ of citizens (e.g., Brown 2015; Crouch, 2004; Gill et al 2012; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). The post-2008 restoration of the authority of this knowledge-power complex went alongside, rather than overcoming, considerable popular scepticism about ‘bankers’: the ‘fat cats’ who caused the crash and walked away from it; the unregulated or under-regulated ‘Masters of the Universe’ whose hubris wrecked homes, lives and economies, and (in the UK particularly) the ‘posh boys’ who wove elite networks linking the City, commerce and government. Such strands of popular scepticism formed part of the disaffections that made up what Jeremy Gilbert, writing about the UK and the rise of UKIP (the anti-EU and anti-immigration United Kingdom Independence Party), has called ‘disaffected consent’:

The very real sense of democratic and political disenfranchisement ... finds expression in one of two ways: as simple apathy and non-participation; or as organised opposition to UK membership of the EU and support for the virtual ending of mass immigration. This combination of policies propelled UKIP into third place in the national vote, and represents a complex set of implicit and explicit demands, which are not solely motivated by old-fashioned racism, xenophobia and conservative authoritarianism. Hostility to the EU, and to patterns of migration which appear to transform their communities and localities without any consultation with them, can also be understood as, in part, expressions of frustration with the lack of meaningful democratic participation (2015: 39–40).

Although we would argue that the dynamics of disaffection were more heterogeneous than this, Gilbert's analysis speaks powerfully to the profoundly unstable character of the form of consent that prevailed in the UK before 2016, whose fragility was dramatically exposed by the Referendum on membership of the EU in June 2016. And, in that moment, expertise came to be dramatically re-politicised.

### **Experts, elites and establishments: the populist interruption.**

Recent political movements broadly described as 'populist' have unsettled the established political order of several European countries and the USA, in the process challenging the dominance of neoliberal economic expertise. There are, of course, many varieties of populism: as Samet and Schiller argue, 'It is necessary to understand how, and on whose behalf, 'the people' – democracy's vital fiction – is constructed, contested and performed' (2017: 4). Here our main focus is on the summoning of a particular notion of 'the people' during the UK 2016 Referendum on membership of the European Union. In particular, this campaign represented the people as disdained and disenfranchised by a liberal elite of experts. Those leading the campaign to remain in the EU put forward powerful 'expert' claims about the damage to the UK economy that would result from Brexit. These were roundly dismissed:

The big guns of the international liberal order were wheeled out to stop us going headlong for the Puerto Rican option [*defaulting on national debt payments, JN&JC*]: the IMF, the WTO, the OECD. Ten Nobel economists added to the din; Obama wagged a finger; Clinton too. Then Soros. In reply a forest of fingers was stuck in the air. (Harding, 2016)

The Leave movement dismissed ‘expert’ claims as an orchestrated attempt by ‘the establishment’ to induce fear among ‘ordinary people’:

“I think people in this country,” declared Vote Leave’s Michael Gove, “have had enough of experts.” His fellow Brexiteers were quick to back him up. “There is only one expert that matters,” said Labour MP Gisela Stuart, also of Vote Leave, “and that’s you, the voter.” Nigel Farage, the leader of Ukip, suggested that many independent experts were actually in the pay of the Government or the EU. All three reminded voters of occasions when “the so-called experts” had made mistakes.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/10/michael-goves-guide-to-britains-greatest-enemy-the-experts/>

The Leave campaign in the UK, and the subsequent Trump presidential campaign in the US, drew on critiques of expertise as technocratic, de-politicizing and disempowering. In the process, they sought to establish a very different form of power – one in which leaders could speak in the name of the people. Particular tendencies were articulated in political campaigns that used demotic language – the language of ‘ordinary people’ (Clarke, 2010b; Turner, 2010) – to distinguish themselves from conventionalized ‘political speak’. This demotic style invoked – and claimed to be at one with – ‘ordinary people’ in addressing their anxieties and fears.

While there are many differences between the formations of politics and power in the UK and US (Grossberg, 2018; Watkins, 2016), both campaigns drew their success in part from their capacity to depict ‘the people’ as a singular national entity whose lives had been damaged by expert elites. Such representations connected the elite, the establishment and experts as forming an ‘out of touch’ political class who failed to understand, or recognize,

the damage done to ‘ordinary people’ by (variously) Europeanization, globalization and the loss of national sovereignty (on the ‘establishment’, see, *inter alia*, Jones, 2014, van Hollen, 2016). The revolt against ‘expertise’ in the moment of Brexit thus refracted questions of both class (antipathy to ruling elites, the very architects of austerity) and nation (expertise symbolized ‘elsewhere’; international institutions, EU bureaucrats and those seeking to protect global free trade). They also identified the nation – as the place where the people live – against the capital, London, as the home of the metropolitan/cosmopolitan elite (echoed in Trump’s attacks on ‘Washington insiders’).

These populist discourses sought to unlock apparently settled configurations of knowledge and power by offering distinctive representations of expertise. In place of authority being grounded in scientific or legitimate knowledge, expertise was reframed as a symbol of rule, inseparable from the experiences of being ruled. Expertise was thus *embodied* authority – and embodied in the wrong sorts of people: global elites, state institutions, financiers, consultants and so on. It is of course dangerous to read the sayings of Trump, Farage and other populists as representing the truth of their position: these are, rather, fleeting fragments of political rhetoric that may, or more probably do not, add up to a coherent view. Nevertheless, such challenges reveal the *contingent* authority of existing forms of expertise: their legitimacy is always conditional, always in the process of being claimed, acceded to, or contested. We think it possible to trace three core discursive themes that delineate the terrain on which the contemporary struggle over power, knowledge and authority is being conducted.

First, ‘expertise’ can be made to symbolise very different things – from the objective and authoritative judgements of the wise, to the overbearing arrogance of out of touch elites. As a rhetorical device it can thus be mobilised for a range of purposes in and beyond political campaigns. In the UK, populist politicians targeted judges, politicians and some media outlets, denouncing them as ‘enemies of the people’ (see, for example, *The Daily Mail*, 3 November 2016). The ‘Leave’ campaign castigated members of the ‘liberal’ and ‘progressive’ elites for being out of touch and for having installed – and benefitted from – a particular form of state power. The disaffected were spoken to, and for, through language that demonized elite governance, including politicians, judges, bankers and welfare

professionals. The campaign targeted migrants, liberals and those concerned with 'identity politics': a shorthand for feminists, antiracists, gays, queers, transsexuals and others viewed as threatening the 'normal' lives of the 'people'. It drew implicitly on long standing left, feminist and other radical political critiques of expertise as undemocratic, disempowering, and elitist. Such critiques were appropriated and mobilized to support a new populist project, articulated through a binary between expertise and the inherent wisdom of the people. In the process, critical aspects of what some have called an 'epistemological populism' were developed (Patten, 2017; Saurette and Gunster, 2011). Patten, for example, has argued that key features of this disposition include: the articulation of an 'anti-elitist common sense', a rejection of the intellectual classes and an insistence on a libertarian notion of the right to 'judge facts for myself'. In a new media ecology that allows for new forms of political and cultural segmentation, Patten suggests that this strategy divides 'the heartland from the rest' and identifies commonsense wisdom as emerging from the heartland – embodied in 'the people'.

Second, then, the conjunctural significance of expertise was shaped through a political practice of establishing a binary distinction between *authenticity* and expertise. The authenticity of the people is constituted through racialized and nationalized understandings of who 'belongs' and who does not. The 'real' people are to be empowered, not through policy innovations or improvements in the democratic process, but by having a leader who can voice the 'common sense' of the common people, expressing their *instinctive* understanding of what is right. Only he (more rarely she), it is claimed, can speak with the authentic voice of the people, a voice that has been silenced and suppressed by the collusion of 'expert power' with political-cultural elites. Those elites shaping state policy, the media and the wider 'liberal culture' are charged with 'discriminating' against those espousing 'traditional' moral values that embody the 'common sense' of the people. As Müller argues, 'Populists do not just criticise elites; they also claim that they and only they represent the true people' (2016: 40). But the 'true people' are only part of the people at large, a populist paradox perfectly expressed in Donald Trump's 2016 statement that 'the only important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don't mean anything' (cited in Müller, 2016: 22). By summoning to power those that have been neglected, dispossessed, and disadvantaged, populist leaders do not simply 'represent'

those silenced voices: they are, rather, *constitutive* of those they claim to represent. Here we think it is important to insist on the articulatory work of populist politics: they do not simply speak for, or express, the views of ‘ordinary people’ as suggested by many commentators (see, for example, Judis, 2016). Rather they selectively articulate, silence and amplify particular popular sentiments, constructing the ‘common sense’ of the people in the process.

The demonization of expertise as the basis of authority and the antithesis of authenticity is thus at the core of populist rhetoric. This points to our third theme: expertise is juxtaposed with a moral understanding of politics and judgement in ways that privilege the latter and present the former as false or corrupt. Müller points to populism as ‘a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified... but ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior’ (Müller 2016: 20). As such, ‘the people’ is constructed as a moral rather than thinking actor; the ‘sense’ that is valorised in appeals to the common sense of the people is one of instinct rather than reason; of trust in the speaker not in an assessment of what is spoken. One feature of this moral register of politics is that is difficult to refute through claims of empirical substance: hence Trump’s rejection of counter claims as ‘false facts’ (neatly turning the use of this phrase by his opponents in the presidential election campaign). In addressing the anxieties and fears of the people, populist campaigners represent themselves as truth tellers and taboo-breakers – ‘telling it like it is’ – especially around questions of immigration, the nation and sovereignty. In this process, they claim to speak for the ‘silent majority’: a public that has been silenced by liberal elites and their overwhelming culture of ‘political correctness’ (see, inter alia, Weigel, 2016; the ‘silent majority’ concept goes back to Richard Nixon who claimed them in 1969).

Such populist projects elicit particular temporalities as parts of their preferred ‘ways of knowing’. They are shaped at the intersection of images of a discredited past – in which the people lost their voice, their capacity to speak to power - and a fantasy future in which their true feelings will be recognized and their desires met. As we saw in the previous section, most of the expertise deployed in favour of Remain during the 2016 UK Referendum, or for a so-called ‘soft’ Brexit thereafter, assumed a more or less predictable future in which

consequences could be attached to different courses of action, such that leaving the EU would have predictably negative impacts on economic growth, financial stability, employment and ‘the markets’. This was, after all, the model of evidence, analysis and expertise that has dominated political discourse since the late twentieth century (even if its capacity to predict problems and crises has appeared recurrently flawed). In contrast, the Leave movement deployed a different sense of time. Most obviously, it celebrated an imaginary past when ‘we’ were in control of our country, our borders, our economy and our lives, captured in the demand to ‘take *back* control’. But it also appealed to the past-as-experience, contrasting the everyday dislocations and disjunctures of economic and social life with the threatened future projected by the Remain camp (see also Davies, 2016, on populism and the suspension of the future). How could it be worse than it has been? The denunciation of ‘expertise’ at the heart of populism thus challenges forms of probabilistic or predictive knowledge geared to conceptions of future development or progress:

‘In rejecting knowledge of the future, Brexitists are saying no to such a politics and the assumptions about social change on which it rests. Theirs is an inquisitorial politics which fixes on the past in order to identify the crimes and betrayals that happened there, to name the guilty parties and to demand that they be punished.’ (Finlayson 2017: 22)

Again, these populist challenges carry echoes of left critiques of dominant power/knowledge formations, particularly those that transformed social knowledge into quasi-scientific forms, that excluded popular knowledge from expert decision-making or that inscribed ‘progress’ as both benign and inevitable. The articulation of them into a rightwing nationalist project also draws on the undoubtedly unequal impacts of this ‘progress’ (reflected in the impacts of de-industrialization, uneven development, wage stagnation, the degradation of work and the decimation of public services: see Clarke and Newman, 2017 for a longer discussion). But Finlayson’s argument about the projected ‘unknowability’ of the future suggests a moralizing divide between the people and their enemies and points to a rearranging of time and temporalities. The distinctive temporality of populism, in which historical time is replaced by a continuous and immediate present, is expressed in a promise to efface ‘any distance between all desires and their realization’ (Taguieff 2007: 16; our translation). The proposition that ‘Leave means Leave’ or Farage’s

celebration of 'Independence Day' carry this sense of time being effaced – the desire to take back control is promised immediate fulfillment. One consequence of this 'immediacy' is to generate further contradictions and antagonisms as political and governmental time (negotiation, planning, policy making, etc.) come back into play. If contemporary forms of populist politics fed off feelings of frustration, anger and a sense of betrayal, then the return of 'governmental time' has added fuel to such feelings and deepened popular scepticism about political elites – and their 'experts'.

### **Conjunctural Configurations: the instabilities of dominant expertise?**

The question of temporality is also at stake in developing a conjunctural understanding of the Brexit moment and the success of a distinctive populist project (Clarke and Newman, 2017). This disaffection from expertise – and its claimed distance from the normative time of politics – helps to explain how the Leave campaign was able to overcome its most evident paradox. The triumph of an anti-elite politics that was led by members of that elite (including leading figures of the Conservative Party such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove) seems perverse: public school educated establishment figures championing the 'people' against the 'elite', whilst not unknown in the history of populist movements, was certainly a distinctive feature of the UK's brush with populism. Their triumph – however momentary – has led to the disruption in all of the established parties (including UKIP). Such dislocations of the political stage – and the potential frustrations of governmental time noted above – may make it even harder to find new bases for political mobilization among an increasingly disaffected and fractured population.

A variety of commentators have seen the moment of Brexit, Trump and a revived populist-nationalism as marking epochal shifts – the arrival of an 'age of anger' (Mishra, 2016) or an era of populism (Judis, 2016). Alternatively, some have argued that this insurgent populism marks the end of liberalism, neo-liberalism or even 'progressive neo-liberalism' (e.g., Gray, 2016; Jacques, 2016; Fraser, 2017). For instance, Fraser argues that:

...Trump's victory is not solely a revolt against global finance. What his voters rejected was not neoliberalism tout court, but progressive neoliberalism. This may sound to

some like an oxymoron, but it is a real, if perverse, political alignment that holds the key to understanding the U.S. election results and perhaps some developments elsewhere too. In its U.S. form, progressive neoliberalism is an alliance of mainstream currents of new social movements (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights), on the one side, and high-end “symbolic” and service-based business sectors (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood), on the other. In this alliance, progressive forces are effectively joined with the forces of cognitive capitalism, especially financialization. However unwittingly, the former lend their charisma to the latter. Ideals like diversity and empowerment, which could in principle serve different ends, now gloss policies that have devastated manufacturing and what were once middle-class lives. (Fraser: 2017)

There is much to debate in this analysis: the idiosyncratic representation of ‘progressive neoliberalism’ that draws on Fraser’s long running view of the collusion of the feminism and other social movements in the making of neoliberalism; the slippage between neoliberalism and its ‘progressive’ variant; and the concept of cognitive capitalism (see, for example, Julia Brenner’s response in *Dissent*: 2017). However, we want to offer a rather different view. This must begin from a view of neoliberalism as an articulated ensemble in which multiple forces are imperfectly aligned. In this ensemble, different rationalities are able to coexist despite their apparent contradictory imperatives and despite their diverse political constituencies. And, certainly, any critique of populism as an overwhelming force must address its interplay with other forces and movements, ‘borrowing, bending and blending’ (Pennycook, 2007: 47) from diverse sources (including left critiques of expertise as a mode of power). Rather, our problem lies with these ‘epochal’ analyses, confidently announcing the ‘end of’ X or Y. In particular, neoliberalism has been pronounced dead on rather too many occasions for anyone to be confident that it has finally breathed its last. As Aditya Chakraborty noted ironically about an earlier death notice: ‘Through the autumn of 2008, a steady stream of obituaries flowed into my inbox. They came from think tanks, from academics and from small publishers of books and journals. All announced the same death and all were gleeful ‘Neoliberalism is dead!’ they crowed. Wasn’t it obvious?’ (2016: ix)

We think it is important to resist the temptations of pronouncing the ‘death of’, or the ‘end of’ in such epochal statements. This means refusing to see historical moments in singular terms (from neoliberalism to post-neoliberalism) or in terms of their singular dynamics, forces, or causes. We understand the temptations to announce the one ‘real’ cause, but instead conjunctural analysis asks us to think about how various lines of force intersected with the fracturing of apparently established governmental and political formations (from the crises of the European Union to the dis-uniting of the United Kingdom). These multiple – and heterogeneous – lines of force were recombined in new articulations and found new voicings that promised to overcome the failures and frustrations, as well as the contradictions and antagonisms, of the existing arrangements. Such a view demands that we think about multiplicities – of forces, tendencies, antagonisms and contradictions – and about the instabilities of the emerging formations that are currently in the process of being constructed.

Elsewhere we have pointed to how the process of reassembling multiple forces into new formations is political *work*. Such work involves the practice of articulation, described by Stuart Hall as marking “the forms of the relationship through which two processes, which remain distinct – obeying their own conditions of existence – are drawn together to form a ‘complex unity’” (1977: 48). The work involved is that of decoupling existing chains of meaning, forging new associations and installing new representations. It relies on the labour of forging alliances, borrowing vocabularies, and reinventing political projects, often through appropriating (partially) other political rationalities. The process of neoliberalization required such work: for example, the articulations with communitarianism (in Blair’s Britain); or Catholic voluntarism (in Northern Italy; see Muehlebach, 2012) drew on established formations which gave the neoliberal project a new vitality and popular reach. In a similar way, we would argue that we need to think of populism, not as a singular form with a unique character, but as an ensemble or assemblage, elements of which may be brought into new articulations – with varieties of nationalism, racism, or white supremacist thinking, for example – to produce newly potent configurations. Such work was highly visible during the UK referendum campaign of 2016 and the US election later that year.

Hall's concept of a 'complex unity' seems indispensable for thinking about the conjuncture as a whole, and for the particular formations that are active within it. It also provides a way of returning to the conception of expertise as particular configurations of power/knowledge with which we began this article. Thinking of these as articulated ensembles – of forms and practices of power, of types of knowledge, deploying specific sets of tactics, devices and forms of calculation, enacted through particular institutional apparatuses – makes it possible to see their contingent character. In turn, this enables analyses of their conditions of existence, their construction and their vulnerabilities. Similar arguments can be made about the different formations of 'populism' that map on to different spatialities and temporalities (SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Modi in India, Orbán in Hungary, and Trump in the US). Such contingent configurations are always potentially unstable (as the assembled elements threaten to become unglued) and potentially contestable. This should lead us away from generic or one dimensional views of either knowledge or power, even when (or perhaps, especially when) the particular fusion of knowledge and power appears hegemonic or incontestably solid. Such solidity exists in a dynamic relationship with instability. Gramsci once suggested that 'the life of the state can be conceived as a series of unstable equilibria' (1971: 182), providing a fruitful image of paradoxical dynamics. We find it a productive way of thinking about states, but think its value extends further – in this case to thinking about forms of expertise as configurations of knowledge-power. Certainly, the role of 'economic' expertise, central to the diverse processes of neoliberalization, has shifted from a position of equilibrium, institutionalized as the necessary and natural knowledge of how economies and their societies work, to a moment of instability, subject to varieties of scepticism, disaffection and disenchantment. But what follows or emerges from such instability? What new equilibria might be constructed in the re-entangling of power, knowledge and politics?

**Emergent articulations: reconfiguring power, knowledge and politics**

Conjunctural analysis requires us to pay attention to the potential lines of development in a complex historical moment, rather than assuming that there is only one way forward. For Raymond Williams (1977), this meant paying attention to the field of possibilities that he characterised as made up of dominant, residual and emergent formations (and their interrelations). For our purposes here, this implies addressing the reconfigurations of power, knowledge and politics that are in play in the present moment, including the emergence of potential new formations. In this final section, then, we sketch some emerging articulations of knowledge, power and politics. We view these as potential sites in which forms and uses of expertise are currently being remade, rather than assuming that they have, or will, become stable configurations..

We begin by pointing to emergent instabilities in and around the discipline of economics itself. There has been extensive scepticism about austerity policies on the basis that there is little or no evidence that austerity works. There have been numerous revolts against the imposition by the EU of technocratic and depoliticising expertise on 'debtor' nations, particularly visible in Greece and Spain (e.g., De Witte et al, 2013; Kowalsky, 2015; Varoufakis, 2016). The IMF offered a self-critical account of the failings of its pro-austerity stance (Elliot, 2016) and even the Bank of England admitted that economic forecasting itself might be 'in crisis' (Giles, 2016). The orthodoxies of economic expertise on which policy 'realism' is based had already been challenged – for example by feminist economists who offered alternative economic imaginaries and practices (Gibson Graham, 2006; Himmelweit, 2013). There have been numerous attempts to challenge economic models that rely on assumptions of permanent growth (e.g., Raworth, 2017). In 2016 protests by economics students at Manchester University dramatized flaws in the economic models that, they argued, had contributed to the financial crisis of 2008. Their protest widened into a series of student campaigns across fifteen countries, and into a new network of civil servants exploring alternative approaches to economic ideas in policymaking. Such instabilities challenge what Earle et al (2017) term *The Econocracy*. They may not fundamentally unravel the knowledge/power knot of economic expertise and its relationship to neoliberal rule, but they certainly create cracks in its facade of inevitability.

A second potential instability arises from the growing significance of emergent clusters of expertise. Foremost has been the growing interest in the 'behavioural sciences' in government and the academy as policymakers have sought new practices for managing populations, for example, by changing the 'choice architecture' that influences human behaviour - to reduce smoking, obesity, infant diseases and other social ills, or to promote recycling, charitable giving and personal health and fitness. The use of such techniques and technologies been widely critiqued as non-deliberative and individualizing (Jones et al, 2014; Newman, 2013), but they have been at the forefront in the turn to 'digital governance' (Dunleavy, 2006); and of innovations in policy and practice, especially, but not only, in the UK. But the growing significance of the behavioural sciences is also fundamental to new alignments of political power based on the use social media (Facebook, Twitter etc.) in political campaigning.. Investigations by the *Observer* newspaper show how companies such as *Cambridge Analytica*, *Strategic Communication Laboratories*, and *AggregateIQ* worked with the Leave campaign in the UK and the Trump campaign in the US in attempts to influence voters (*Observer Review* 26/2/17, *Observer* 5/3/17). Such reports revealed not only the dense networks that connected companies, campaigns and digital platforms such as Facebook, but also the extent of influence by billionaire funders such as Robert Mercer. The claims made about *Cambridge Analytica* have been disputed, as have the 'neuropretensions' of neuroscience (Rose and Rose, 2016). However, such forms of disciplinary expertise have helped shape a new consolidation of power, expertise and financial capital capable of reaching into the beliefs, choices and behaviours of citizens. And such forms of power – transnational, networked, secretive, digital – typically tend to elude public scrutiny (Wedel, 2009).

The harvesting of personal data is of course not only associated with right-wing movements. The thinktank NESTA argues that the quality of democratic decisions can be improved by the use of digital platforms to elicit citizen knowledge and transform the quality of political engagement (Simon et al., 2017). In a similar vein, Noveck (2016) argues that 'big data' affords a means of tapping into distributed expertise in order to help develop more participative institutions. This focus on the power of 'citizen expertise' looks back to earlier attempts to enhance citizen participation in governing in order to address the defects of forms of professionalised governance. But rather than seeking public opinions on specific

policy choices (the tendency of governance-led involvement initiatives) Noveck advocates the use of crowdsourcing techniques in order to draw on citizen skills and knowledge. Such developments have echoes in a variety of technologies for crowdsourcing commercial design ('prosumer' techniques involving users in design and development) and crowdfunding forms of social and commercial innovation (see, for example, Ritzer et al, 2012). However, the implications of the growing interest in 'big data' remain ambiguous: it offers tools and technologies that serve both anti-democratic populist movements and would-be progressive attempts to democratize governance. There are, however, dangers in viewing these as equivalent. First, attempts to mine personal data to influence voting behaviour is concerned with opinions and values, while crowd-sourcing seeks to elicit a variety of skills and knowledge. Second, the former seeks to generate mass data while the latter is explicitly focused on multiplicity and difference. But third, and most importantly for our argument, the attempt to draw parallels overlooks the dynamics of power that shape these different developments: the former backed by corporations and financed by multi-millionaire backers; the latter a normative set of ideas on the fringes of government.

We might also trace the emergence of new political forms and forces. In April 2017, thousands of people joined a 'March for Science' to warn against the threat to scientific research that the Trump presidency posed. In the UK, numerous pro-EU local activist groupings have emerged, while investigative and campaigning journalism has flourished, albeit from a fragile financial base. Failures of flood defenses, food scares and other high profile tragedies (including the fire in Grenfell Tower, a high rise block of social housing in London in 2017) have led to calls for a return to regulation and a reassertion of the professional skills underpinning it. In the UK and the US we can also trace a reassertion of judicial power as a means of constraining executive power within government. All point to the potential reassertion of traditional political ideas and institutions embedded in law, regulation, and in the multiple organs of statehood. The formerly dominant formations of policy and politics have not exactly gone away, although their legitimacy has been called into question. Announcements of the 'health of the economy' and promises/threats about the economic consequences of particular courses of action continue to dominate political discourse (in claims about the virtues of free trade, protectionism, and nativist imaginings of work and welfare, for example). And popular scepticism about the role and power of

‘experts’ (including bankers, economists, politicians, judges, regulators) remains a potent force. This points to a much more unsettled place for dominant configurations of knowledge and power in the present moment as political regimes attempt to create new equilibria – new settlements – in the face of fractured and fractious publics.

This is by no means an exhaustive survey of dominant, emergent and residual configurations. Rather our aim has been to suggest that - in this currently unstable landscape – new articulations of knowledge, power and politics are being elaborated that have potential for realigning political forces, practices and relationships. Some of these seek to intensify current concentrations of power, while others seek to loosen or unsettle them. Existing sites, forms and practices of expertise – and their articulations of knowledge and power – will not go away easily. What the present moment has made clear, though, is that we cannot expect that challenges and contestations to them will lead to progressive or liberatory outcomes. On the contrary, the nationalist-authoritarian-populist appropriations of critiques of expertise threaten profoundly regressive recompositions of knowledge, power and politics.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued for the importance of thinking about expertise through the concepts of conjuncture and articulation (terms central to the vocabulary of cultural studies). These concepts point to the contextual specificity of forms of expertise – their location in particular formations of space/time – and to the ways in which specific arrangements of knowledge, power and politics are configured. Such a perspective illuminates the shifting fortunes of dominant forms of expertise in recent Euro-Atlantic politics, where populist movements have made expertise and experts contestable. The process of identifying and discrediting ‘experts’ as part of the cosmopolitan elite or establishment has undercut claims to objective or scientific authority. The process involves the labour of political actors mobilizing, we have suggested, deep rooted popular scepticism about expertise (particularly economic expertise) and drawing on previous left critiques of knowledge-as-power. These insurgent attacks on expertise, elites and the establishment ‘in the name of the people’

borrow extensively from progressive analyses even while bending them to other political ends.

This leaves critics with some problems to address. First, can we be more specific and careful about our critiques of knowledge/power: are there some forms of expertise that might be valued, recognized, defended or developed? Our analysis of ‘emergent’ and ‘traditional’ forms of expertise in the final section suggests the need for a more careful deconstruction of expertise, modes of knowing and forms of authority, rather than assuming that ‘expertise’ is always effectively sutured into relations and practices of domination. Second, it implies thinking more contingently about how knowledge and power are articulated – and their relationship to fields of political contestation and activation. How might the ‘good sense’ (rather than the ‘common sense’) of people be animated and activated (Crehan, 2016)? Third, it implies thinking about conjunctures as heterogeneous – made up of contradictory, antagonistic and divergent forces and tendencies. As we have noted, there are a number of forces and movements contesting the ‘de-politicizing’ effects of dominant configurations of power/knowledge, creating instead an unsettling re-politicization. Through such a frame, it becomes possible to see the shifting dynamics of stabilization and disequilibrium in what Gramsci called the ‘life of the state’ – and in the formations of knowledge, power and politics in which the life of the state is entangled. In the end, we believe that attention to the ‘instabilities of expertise’ reveals a terrain that is more uncertain, more contested and more fractious than conventional approaches would suggest.

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