

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## A sense of loss? Unsettled attachments in the current conjuncture

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Clarke, John (2019). A sense of loss? Unsettled attachments in the current conjuncture. *New Formations*, 96-97 pp. 132-146.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2019 Lawrence and Wishart



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.3898/NEWF:96/97.05.2019>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

## **A sense of loss? Unsettled attachments in the current conjuncture.**

**John Clarke**

*New Formations*, 98-97: 132-46.

### **Abstract:**

In what ways does conjunctural analysis help us to think better about the present? In this article, I will suggest that this way of thinking (Stuart Hall's demanding gift to cultural studies) offers us three things of value for dealing with a turbulent and troubling present:

- A configuration of time-space: not just the conventional here and now, but spatial relations and entangled temporalities;
- Attention to heterogeneous social forces and their political alignments;
- The principle of articulation, rather than the analysis of singularities.

A conjunctural analysis helps to illuminate the present and I suggest that it might be approached in terms of the framing effects of different formations, different temporalities and the different 'senses of loss' that were articulated in the politics of Brexit.

**Keywords:** conjuncture, articulation, loss, social forces, condensation, overdetermination.

During a recent workshop about different political movements in the present moment, one questioner suggested that we – the presenters – were rather wasting our time by giving excessive attention to 'ephemera' rather than dealing with the underlying fundamental dynamics. This challenge opens up the 'problem space' of conjunctural analysis: if the fundamental dynamics of the present (relations, processes, structures, etc.) are well understood, what value is added by examining the froth of political and cultural formations? My brief answer in the workshop suggested that conjunctural analysis was valuable because we have no way of knowing in advance what processes, relationships and dynamics will turn out to be merely ephemeral and which will be consequential. I might have added that even 'fundamental' processes have to pass through the other domains of social formations and may be affected by that passage; and, more troublingly, that I am not sure we all agree on what is fundamental and how it works in practice. As social forces are mobilised, de-mobilised and realigned, as political projects strive to reconfigure the possibilities of economic and social action, as shifting registers and formations of political discourse create new articulations, then possibilities of change and development come to be opened up – and closed down. This, for me, defines both the possibility and significance of thinking conjuncturally. In what follows, I try to demonstrate how it might work by exploring some of the dimensions of conjunctural analysis and then taking the moment of Brexit as a site for thinking in such terms.

In developing these arguments, I suggest that conjunctural analysis builds on Raymond Williams's distinction between 'epochal' analysis and 'actual historical' analysis. He noted that while 'epochal' analysis worked with a sense of the dominant cultural formations and processes that constituted the fundamental character of an epoch, 'actual historical' analysis

demanding a richer analytical repertoire, not least to avoid the mistake of treating the 'dominant' as the only show in town. Instead, he argued that:

We have certainly still to speak of the 'dominant' and the 'effective', and in these senses of the hegemonic. But we find that we have also to speak, and indeed with further differentiation of each, of the 'residual' and the 'emergent' which in any real process, and at any moment in the process, are significant both in themselves and in what they reveal of the characteristics of the 'dominant'.<sup>1</sup>

His careful clarification of the 'residual' and the 'emergent' remains a helpful and productive distinction, but perhaps the most important pointer from this discussion is his insistence on the way in which these three elements – the dominant, residual and emergent – are always in dynamic interaction. He both offers us a sense of a field on which different elements can be identified and located, and an understanding of the shifting triangulation of these different positions (not least through processes of 'incorporation' into the dominant).

These distinctions from Williams point toward the promise of conjunctural analysis and were built upon in Stuart Hall's development of the Gramscian distinction between organic and conjunctural in ways that suggested Cultural Studies could – and perhaps should – be distinguished as a field of study with the 'conjuncture' at its heart.<sup>2</sup> From *Policing the Crisis* onwards, he regularly returned to the problem – and the promise – of the conjuncture, right through to his work with Doreen Massey and Mike Rustin in the *Soundings* exploration of neoliberalism and its crises. For example:

**Massey:** The other thing that's really striking is the importance of thinking of things as complex moments, where different parts of the overall social formation may themselves, independently, be in crisis in various ways. So although we see this moment as a big economic crisis, it is also a philosophical crisis in some kinds of ways—or it could be, if we got hold of the narrative. So it's really important that we don't only "do the economy," as it were.

**Hall:** Absolutely not. It is not a moment to fall back on economic determinism, though it may be tempting to do so, since the current crisis seems to start in the economy. But any serious analysis of the crisis must take into account its other "conditions of existence" ...

But we must address the complexity of the crisis as a whole. Different levels of society, the economy, politics, ideology, common sense, etc, come together or "fuse." The definition of a conjunctural crisis is when these "relatively autonomous" sites—which have different origins, are driven by different contradictions, and develop according to their own temporalities—are nevertheless "convened" or condensed in the same moment. Then there is crisis, a break, a "ruptural fusion."<sup>3</sup>

Despite its more specific focus on 'conjunctural crisis', this exchange points to one core characteristic of a conjuncture – its composition out of multiple elements: levels of society, with different points of origin, dynamics and temporalities, and bringing different contradictions into being. In what follows, I will develop this argument about multiplicity as a counter to analyses of the present that focus instead on singularities - the rise of populism, the crises of neoliberalism or globalization, and more – which tend towards the 'epochal' problem as defined by Williams. So, how might we understand the present moment?

**Thinking multiply: framings and temporalities.**

The rise of new and disruptive political movements and projects have unsettled the habits of ‘politics as usual’ in the UK, USA, India, Turkey, Hungary and elsewhere. They have been marked by new combinations of nationalism, populism, and authoritarianism – and more. Together, they suggest the ‘shock of the new’ and invite us to imagine a new Age or Era. The temptation is to frame these developments through ‘neoliberalism’ – as the next wave of neoliberalisation, as marking neoliberalism’s latest crisis, or even, optimistically, as the end of neoliberalism. However, I think it is productive to think about other processes, dynamics, formations, and temporalities that are in play in producing the present conjuncture. For example, we might name the underlying conditions as the still unresolved crises of Atlantic Fordism which, for a while at least, provided the stabilising regime of accumulation for 20th century capitalism in the global North. Whether a new regime of accumulation has been developed and stabilised in what Jessop calls a new ‘spatio-temporal fix’ is open to argument.<sup>4</sup> For my purposes here, though, starting from Atlantic Fordism and its crises reframes the dynamics and temporalities that might be in play in understanding the present. In particular, it gives a specific visibility to the question of the ‘national economy’ and the shifting fortunes of the ‘core’ Fordist working class and their trajectory through processes of de-industrialisation, de-socialisation and de-collectivisation following the original 1970s crises of Fordism.

A second possible framing would connect the contemporary disruptions to the political temporalities of (European) social democracy as the dominant political formation that secured consent for the development of Atlantic Fordism. It then mutated to become one of the political devices through which popular consent to the programme of constant innovation of neoliberalism was managed. Commentators such as Wolfgang Streeck have argued that the exhaustion of social democracy derives from its enrolment into this task of managing consent amidst the crises of neoliberalism, while Jeremy Gilbert has suggested that the growing instability of consent – and the rise of what he calls ‘disaffected consent’ – emerges from the limits and contradictions of this particular political articulation.<sup>5</sup>

A rather different framing is the long drawn out disruptions of the Family and its associations as the ‘foundation stone’ of Western societies. The contested formations of patriarchal authority, gender divisions and conceptions of sexuality have been central to a double political-cultural dynamic of both challenge and restoration, unsettling previously normalised and naturalised formations of social reproduction. Their effects – and the attempt to restore the natural order of things – have been central to some of the current conservative-authoritarian political movements in Europe and North America, from Republican misogyny to the familialism of the Law and Justice Party in Poland.

While these framings bring different temporalities and formations into view, they operate largely within a Northern/Western spatial disposition. A rather different framing might be found in the unfinished dynamics of de-colonisation and its ‘unfinished business’ – what Gilroy calls ‘postcolonial melancholia’.<sup>6</sup> This field of disturbances sees the ‘nation’ configured differently, through its relation to Empire, through the formation of imaginaries of the metropole and its Others, and through the inability to recognise and reconcile what has been ‘lost’.<sup>7</sup> Given the potency of nationalist, racist and nativist voicings in the present, such a framing seems indispensable. It is, of course, like the others, a spatially differentiated dynamic – different for settler-colonial societies (such as the USA) compared to European metropolises. Different racialised formations give rise to distinct, if overlapping, dynamics in the present. But those different formations and trajectories have come to coalesce around ‘the

fate of the nation' concerns, especially in response to migratory movements of people to the global North/West. Such concerns have motivated a variety of exclusivist strategies ranging from citizenship tests to the reinforcement (physical and symbolic) of borders and boundaries.

It is in the context of these multiple framings, and the diverse dynamics and temporalities that they bring into view, that it is possible to turn back to the issue of neoliberalism. The current conjuncture is indeed – in part – constituted by the dynamics of neoliberalism, or at least by the rise and proliferation of neoliberalisms (varying across time and space). But, in the light of the other framings, it cannot be only a question of neoliberalism, but of these proliferating neoliberalisms always entangled with, articulated with, and overdetermined by, all those other forces, dynamics, tendencies, antagonisms and contradictions. Sometimes, these are the terrain that neoliberal projects inherit (the crises of Atlantic Fordism, the complex antagonisms of postcolonial populations, etc.). At other times, they are the effects of neoliberal innovations, interventions, strategies – and failures. The present is marked by neoliberalism's accumulating crises and antagonisms and its recurrent efforts to find new ways of governing them, and then the recurrent failures of those governing strategies.

I suggest that it is important to view a conjuncture as composed of multiple dynamics rather than a singular line of development. These multiple dynamics are condensed into the making of a present – a 'here and now' that is simultaneously overdetermined and undetermined. It is *overdetermined* (in the Freudian/Althusserian sense) by the constitutive co-presence of multiple forces, tendencies, contradictions and antagonisms. It is *underdetermined* in its multiple lines of possibility – the different resolutions of the current troubles that might be assembled and enacted. It is precisely this sense of multiplicity that resists simplistic or deterministic readings of the 'crisis' or its resolution. On the contrary, the conjuncture has several crises in play, creating a terrain of possibilities which can be mobilised for different projects or acted upon to create new articulations.<sup>8</sup>

### **Telling the Time: the conjuncture as condensed temporalities.**

This attention to multiplicity raises a key question about time and temporality: how is a conjuncture produced by the articulation of different temporalities? In the previous section, I suggested that very different framings – neoliberalisation, the crisis of social democracy, the unfinished dynamics of post-colonialism and the transformations of a familial/gender order – combine to constitute the present moment, contributing different dynamics, tensions and antagonisms. Each of them brings with it a different *temporality*, creating an active and intense condensation that shapes the 'times in which we live'. This issue has also been addressed by Michele Filippini in his recent book on Gramsci, in which he argues that Gramsci developed a distinctive view of multiple temporalities but that:

This temporal plurality should not be confused, however, with an objective, eternal condition that sees fragmentariness as a value in itself, and which consequently expresses a politics that tends to incorporate these diverse temporalities into one 'harmonious plurality'.<sup>9</sup>

Rather, he argues, Gramsci saw this multiplicity as the locus of a form of hegemonic struggle in which one temporality became accepted not just as dominant but as normal, subordinating or even suppressing other temporalities in the process. Might this be understood as one aspect of the present conjuncture's character? It is, then, not just a question of the intersection and

condensation of different temporalities, but the conjuncture as a moment in which the normalised hegemonic temporality – the rhythm of capitalist time itself – comes to be at risk, vulnerable to challenge, or unsettled as other temporalities assert themselves? Such other temporalities might include the varieties of ‘speed up’ that have been imposed, from the intensified speed of capitalist calculation and financial flows to the digitally enhanced sense of immediacy. Alternatively, we might note the sense of slowing down or even stasis attaching to the lives of those (in the currently circulating metaphor) ‘left behind’ by the forces variously named as globalization/neo-liberalism/progress/modernisation. We might also consider the profound tensions emerging between the apparent urgency of planetary time in the face of ecological disaster and the foot-draggingly slow time of ‘business as usual’ in the dominant political and economic regimes. Yet again, there is an apparent temporal conflict between the summoning of populist political choices and their desired immediate effects (Brexit as ‘independence Day’) and their strained encounters with the slow pace of ‘governmental’ time, as treaties are negotiated, laws drafted, discussed and ratified, policies formed and reformed or judicially tested.<sup>10</sup> Temporality thus becomes the site of strains and tensions and, in consequence, emerges as the focus of political-cultural struggles for the power to ‘tell the time’. What is at stake here centres on the capacity to articulate the present, and its relationships to past and future. Such articulations contest our ‘proper’ attachments to these times and seek to define the appropriate trajectories and rhythms of economic, social and political life, including the denigration or exclusion of ‘those people’ who fail to move in step with them. These struggles over ‘telling the time’ are central to the contemporary politics of popular mobilisation – and de-mobilisation – and I will return to them in the following sections.

### **Anger and Loss: articulating popular disaffection**

At the heart of a conjuncture are *multiple* social forces, rather than the singular, simplified, battalions of classical class analysis. The implications of the different framings of the conjuncture I explored above are that shifting formations of class are interwoven, in unsettling ways, with shifting racialised and gendered formations, such that people come to identify themselves, and act, through a range of different repertoires. I will explore the consequences of this heterogeneity of social forces in a moment, in the context of Brexit, but first, it is important to think about this heterogeneity as the ground on which the political-cultural practices of articulation are put to work. There is good reason why Stuart Hall’s attention to the demands of the conjuncture was paralleled by his interest in the practice of articulation – as a means of forging connections. He explained that:

By the term ‘articulation’, I mean a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not ‘eternal’ but has to be constantly renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections – rearticulations – being forged. It is also important that an articulation between different practices does not mean that they become identical or that one is dissolved into the other. Each retains its distinct determinations and conditions of existence. However, once an articulation is made, the two practices can function together, not as an ‘immediate identity’ (in the language of Marx’s ‘1857 Introduction’) but as distinctions within a ‘unity’.<sup>11</sup>

Here we can see some of the typical formulations of articulation – in particular, the

insistence that connections or links are not ‘necessarily given’ as a fact of life or by law-like correspondences. Instead, Hall insisted on the importance of analysing the specifics of particular articulations. This meant paying attention to both the conditions of their existence and the political-cultural work (practice) that went into making and sustaining specific articulations. No articulation – whether the combination of social forces in a political bloc or a discursive alignment of meanings and politics – came with a ‘lifetime guarantee’. Rather, their internal organisation (involving potential disjunctures, contradictions, antagonisms and tensions) and their external conditions of existence create the possibility of ‘disarticulation and rearticulation’. This understanding of articulation – combining both its contingency and the necessity of the work of production and maintenance – was a critical element in Hall’s approach to cultural studies. With this in mind, we can turn to consider the moment of Brexit within a longer conjuncture and give attention to the practices of articulation that were in play in bringing about the referendum decision to Vote Leave. The successful ‘Vote Leave’ campaign appeared to speak effectively for many of those frustrated by the status quo and angry at the prevailing Europhile political-cultural ‘elite’. It was, as Jeremy Harding observed, a moment of vigorous popular disaffection:

The big guns of the international liberal order were wheeled out to stop us going headlong for the Puerto Rican option: 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.<sup>12</sup>

Much has been made of Brexit, and other populist eruptions, as giving voice to popular anger.<sup>13</sup> But this attention to populism raises questions about how we understand the process by which ‘the people’ come to voice. Judis, for example, sees the recent ‘populist explosion’ as expressing the concerns of ordinary people alienated from dominant politics. He suggests that populist movements arise in

times when people see the prevailing political norms – put forward, preserved and defended by the leading segments in the country – as being at odds with their own hopes, fears, and concerns. The populists express these neglected concerns and frame them in a politics that pits the people against an intransigent elite.<sup>14</sup>

Such a view ignores the *work* of politics – in particular, the practice of articulation between what Gramsci called ‘fragments’ of common sense and a would-be hegemonic political project. Populist projects – like others – involve the selective voicing of elements of common sense (and the silencing or denial of others) by way of narratives, propositions, claims and promises that appear to represent a coherent programme grounded in the ‘good sense’ of ordinary people. Judis may be right that some people feel at odds with the ‘prevailing political norms’, or even distanced from prevailing political institutions, but that does not imply that their sentiments can be read off from their politicized representations. There are other problems about Judis’s view of populism, not least the emptiness of the concept of the people being deployed here. If (some) people feel a sense of loss – of their country, of their way of life, of their power – should we not interrogate these feelings and ask who holds them? If that ‘way of life’ is built on white privilege, or male power, for example, it may be important to know about the social distribution and political implications of these ‘neglected concerns’. It does not make the feelings any less real, or any less politically potent, but it does matter – analytically and politically – that not all feelings are held in common among ‘the people’. Thinking conjuncturally, however, makes it possible to think about anger or loss

not as generic affective conditions, but as both conjuncturally specific and multiply constituted.

Here I want to focus more specifically on 'a sense of loss' as a defining trope of Brexit and the present political moment. It links many elements, connecting despair, dissent, and disaffection. It provides points of potential articulation for contemporary political movements in many settings, not just the UK, most obviously in the range of resurgent populisms, nationalisms and nativisms currently in play in Europe, India and North America.<sup>15</sup> This 'sense of loss' might be what Williams once called the 'structure of feeling' of the present moment and stands out for me in two ways. First, given my interest in time and temporalities, it invokes time as a core constitutive element of the current conjuncture, articulating a version of the past (that which has been lost), the present (as the terrain of potential action) and a future (of promised restoration, or at least revenge). Second, however, it demands attention to the multiplicity that is concealed within its singularity – what losses are bundled together in this 'sense of loss'. In response to a question about 'the role of passion, emotion, affective states in the formation of political agency', Judith Butler observed that:

One way to answer this is to interrogate the relationship of politics to loss, since loss is what occasions melancholia and since loss is what melancholia seeks to deny in a certain way. It's clear, for instance, that many political movements are fuelled by the sense of a loss that has already taken place or that is expected to take place. It could be a loss of autonomy, it could be a loss of land. It could be the violent loss of relatives in a war; but many political passions emerge from an experience of loss that comes to understand itself as collective. What becomes difficult to read sometimes is how these passions then get transmuted into certain kinds of political claims that don't always reflect them in a clear way. For instance, take something that is notoriously difficult, like Israeli military aggression. It seems to me that it is based on a profound sense of mournfulness, in a rage that comes from a limitless sense of mournfulness and a sense of precariousness that is not always possible to read and that in certain ways that is not always possible to read as the anxiety over loss that it is. The transmutation of mourning into aggression is something that Freud talked about as melancholia, and it was something that he thought could only be overcome by returning melancholia to mourning, to the extent that that's possible. There would have to be a more overt way of acknowledging loss: aggression is, to a certain extent, an effort to deny loss.<sup>16</sup>

Butler poses a critical question about the 'transmutation' of a sense of loss into political movement and mobilisation. Here, surely, is where the idea of articulation as a practice is a useful concept – helping us to identify how a specific sense of loss becomes connected to a specific version of political identification, attachment and action. I will explore the issue of articulation in a moment, but first, I think it is important to question that singular indefinite article – why should we think that contemporary populist politics (such as Brexit) involve A sense of loss? Instead, I want to suggest that there are multiple senses of loss in play, located in differing domains, experiences and affective registers.

We might begin with the loss of Work in the aftermath of neoliberal globalisation. Specific areas, sectors and industries have experienced the cumulative impacts of deindustrialisation, the desocialisation of labour and the decollectivisation of the worker. The resulting shifts in forms and patterns of employment (especially casualisation) and a growing precarisation of the actual/potential work force have undermined the assumed nature of work (as paid employment) and its social, cultural and political entanglements.<sup>17</sup> For example, in a 2016

interview with Sean Illing, Justin Gest argued that the ‘white working class’ in the USA had experienced precisely this sense of loss:

**Sean Illing**

You say working class whites are radicalizing due to an “acute sense of loss.” What, exactly, have they lost? And who took it from them?

**Justin Gest**

From their perspective, they've lost it all. They look back into the mid-century and they see white working-class communities, people who never finished university degrees or even high school, who were able to get stable 9-to-5 jobs that paid a livable wage and allowed them to support a family of four. And they lived in communities that they perceived to be stable and safe and middle class.

As a result of that middle class status and their numbers, white working-class people were largely in the center of the political world. Their votes were coveted by both political parties and their voices seemed to matter. That economic and social and political standing has all been undermined in the time since the end of the manufacturing era, and they see themselves as politically alienated and, in some cases, vilified — and this is in a country they once defined.

And so it's this sense of loss that motivates so much of their frustration and so much of the political energy we're seeing right now. They are consumed by nostalgia.<sup>18</sup>

Gest’s comments point to the very particular form of work that is at stake here – the experience of the core working class in Euro-Atlantic Fordism – and the associated form of worker that is both racialized and gendered (since this is also the model of the ‘family wage’ earned by a male head of household). This formation is some distance from work-in-general, but has been taken as the normative concept for current discussions about loss in the formerly Fordist economies of the North. Gest also rightly points to the ways in which this form of waged labour, including its structure, locations and rhythms, was articulated with other cultural and political formations: the (often segregated) residential ‘communities’, the circulation of the ‘American dream’ in the form of suburban home ownership (and the gendered division between home and work), and a certain sense of mobility (especially via the automobile). This core working class was also incorporated into political processes as the providers of ‘consent’ to planned progress enacted through ‘politics as usual’. This assemblage of elements has been coming apart for a long time, as individual elements have been strained and contested (the racial settlement, the gender settlement, the economic settlement) making the whole ensemble profoundly unstable. But the address to these constituencies in contemporary populisms has dramatized them as political forces – for example, in Trump’s restorationist promises (making [this] America great again), and in some of the desires to escape the EU in the moment of Brexit.

Dramatic – and highly visible – though it is, this is not the only ‘sense of loss’ currently in play. It is also possible to trace the outline of a sense of loss of ‘the social’. As David Lammy MP argued following the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, ‘people want the social back’.<sup>19</sup> Wrapped up in this phrase are several things, linking strong communities (though not ones founded on racial homogeneity and exclusion), a civic culture of infrastructure and identification sustained by an expansive local state, and a public realm embodied in, and sustained by, public services that enabled individual and collective development. This sense of loss registers a different neoliberal disaster: the long running dismantling and degradation of that public realm under way since the late 1970s. That realm was (as Lammy well knows) never quite the generous and inclusive collectivity that we might like to imagine, but

compared to the emaciated and impoverished public realm now visible, the contrast is stark. This sense of loss embodies one version of the claim that ‘nobody is bothered about ordinary people’, since all of the leading political parties – in England, especially – have colluded in this dismantling as they pursued the promises (fantasies?) of neoliberal growth. Such material and affective dislocations certainly underpin the long-running, but deepening, sense of political distrust and disaffection. Scepticism and cynicism about politics and politicians has been a part of the subordinate condition at least since the enlargement of the franchise to include ‘ordinary people’, but the commitment to neoliberalism (in its many incarnations) certainly ensured that such sentiments grew both wider and deeper. This culminated in the attempted depoliticisation of the economic (at the same time as it was elevated to the ruling doxa) and the subsequent collapse into neoliberal austerity following the 2007-8 crash.

Still further senses of loss emerge in the long and unfinished postcolonial period and the contestation of racialised structures of supremacy and domination both within and between nations. The working through of these difficult dynamics has manifested itself in a variety of morbid forms – the denial of race (as in France), the denial of racism, the slides between morphological and cultural signifiers of difference, the rise and fall of multi-culturalism, the discovery – and denial – of institutional racism, the collective psychodrama of what Gilroy has called ‘postcolonial melancholia’ and finally the blowback against changes that ‘went too far’. Equality politics – around race, gender and sexuality – have increasingly been named and blamed as the causes of our present troubles. Here, the intersection of several different senses of loss here is often crystallised around the idea of ‘a way of life’ that cannot be sustained. But since such ways of life were built upon structures of internal and international colonialism (and domesticated patriarchy), it is hardly surprising that they might have proved unsustainable. The material and affective entanglements of forms of privilege pose both analytical and political problems in the present, but a starting point is surely to recognise that a ‘return to class’, especially one that can only capture class as embodied in the white (and male) working class, is to be stuck in a perverse form of identity politics.<sup>20</sup>

The point is that ‘a sense of loss’ can denote all of these losses – and probably more. The phrase performs two different functions: first it acts as a convenient – and potent – placeholder for analysts, commentators and activists trying to identify the new politics of populism. The sense of loss forms the connective point that links the disaffected to new mobilisations, such as the Vote Leave campaign, Trumpism and other nationalist-populist movement across Europe and elsewhere. But secondly, it works as the articulatory device for those political projects: they have been successful in offering political descriptions, images and language that *selectively* address and give voice to those sensibilities. It is precisely this articulatory practice that is missed by writers such as Judis when they talk about populist politics ‘reflecting’ popular feelings. Such feelings have to be articulated and mobilised to become effective political forces. At the same time, other experiences and feelings (including other losses or accounts of loss) have to be de-mobilised, silenced or refused as inappropriate. As Karen Ho has argued, ‘Right-wing populism seeks to obscure rather than reveal the consequences when corporations, now governed by the concerns of finance and private equity, are interested not in the welfare of workers or even long-term productivity, but in mergers and acquisitions and financial dealmaking to boost stock prices and financial fees’.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, other senses of loss have been denied or discredited, such as the losses resulting from gendered and racialised violence, or the losses of home, life, and family associated with migration. The ‘sense of loss’ is the site of intensive and wide-ranging political work, rather than a generic condition. As we struggle to make sense of old and new

intersections of affect and politics, it becomes more important to attend to the particularities of emotional states and the political work involved in their mobilisation.<sup>22</sup>

### **Building a bloc? Social fractures and political alliances of Brexit and beyond**

Focusing more specifically on Brexit as a political moment raises questions about how we understand social forces and their mobilization and de-mobilization as political forces. For example, was Brexit a moment in which the Leave campaign succeeded in speaking for disenchanted working class voters? The Referendum result certainly revealed a profoundly divided and contradictory ‘nation’, but these divisions have been mapped onto some strangely simplifying political demographics – of place, age and, perhaps most strikingly, class. There are two problems about the supposed alignment of the Leave vote and class in the UK. The first involves issues about the strong support for Vote Leave among the traditional middle classes, what Janet Newman and I have called elsewhere the traditionalist ‘suburbs and shires’ who also see themselves as experiencing a ‘sense of loss’.<sup>23</sup> The second issue concerns the strangely archaic conception of the working class that underpins much of these debates, involving precisely that historically specific incarnation of the Fordist working class (and its typical embodiments). It indicates above all the need for a historically dynamic understanding of class formation that would be attentive to the complex social and economic impacts of neo-liberalisation on class formation in the UK which have produced a combination of joblessness, work degradation and forms of precarity.

These issues point to a central issue for conjunctural analysis: how are social groups mobilized as political forces? As I have tried to indicate above, this implies thinking carefully about class, but also its intersections with other social relations – of gender, race/ethnicity and age, for example. But such distinctions do not translate automatically into political forces. Rather, we need to consider how (some) people come to see themselves as being spoken to, and for, in political discourses, representations and imaginaries: the ‘hailings’ that invite and incite recognition, identification and action. The Brexit campaign assembled a potent repertoire of populist, nationalist, anti-migrant and anti-European elements, sewn into place by threads of xenophobia and racism, that centred on a promise to *restore* the nation – putting the Great back into ‘Great Britain’ – and offering a sense of potency (‘taking back control’). Leave voters were invited to see themselves as the neglected core of a nation, the ‘ordinary, decent people’ (Nigel Farage) who had been taken for granted and abused by a metropolitan-cosmopolitan elite. Such ordinary people were invited to see themselves as inhabiting a culture of decency and toleration (‘British values’) that had been ruthlessly exploited by migrants whose capacity to enjoy the fruits of the United Kingdom (including picking them, as seasonal labourers) was being sustained by the EU’s commitment to Freedom of Movement. As I have already suggested, a critical element in this mobilisation was the possibility of expressing emotional states: loss, frustration, anger and rage. The referendum – itself a political form significantly different from electoral politics and its associated party affiliations – provided a means of dissenting, of saying No: as Insa Koch puts it, ‘a chance to reject government tout court and to say no to a system of representative democracy that many have come to experience in punitive terms’.<sup>24</sup>

The multiple varieties of saying No that were articulated in the moment of Brexit required an unstable mix of people and politics that was mobilized in the Vote Leave campaign, assembled under the leadership of idiosyncratic embodiments of capital (see Arron Banks, for example), populist politicians denied a leadership role (Nigel Farage of UKIP), and a strange cast of Conservative party chancers (notably Boris Johnson and Michael Gove) who saw the

possibility of personal and political opportunities within the political disturbances occasioned by the referendum. This somewhat heterogeneous leadership managed to build a temporary coalition of the bereft, frustrated and outraged. This coalition cut across class lines, captured in Allan Cochrane's description of the 'strange alliance' between the twin forms of nostalgia emerging from the post-imperial Home Counties and the post-industrial heartlands.<sup>25</sup> Both participation and voting in the referendum were significantly structured by age, reflected in a Leave vote cohered around socially distributed sentiments of loss and grievance – diverse though the forms of loss and grievance might be. It is worth noting that one of the puzzles of the (increasingly long drawn out) moment of Brexit is that most attention and analysis has been focused on the Brexiters. I do not have the scope to redress that imbalance here, but it is worth noting that those who voted Remain also formed a complex assemblage – an equally temporary alliance built out of diverse social forces: leading fractions of industrial and especially financial capital; much of the broadsheet press, as opposed to most of the tabloids who supported Leave; core sections of most of the political parties; and the public sector-based and more socially liberal fractions of the middle classes and some sections of the working class: this alliance was again strongly shaped by age. The Remain vote was also built from multiple motivations – ranging from enthusiastic endorsement of the EU marketplace to those attached to more cosmopolitan, multi-cultural and anti-racist sentiments, or to the (increasingly residual) traces of the social dimension of the EU and other internationalist dispositions. It is perhaps most important to avoid a simplifying distinction that treats Brexit as the embodiment of visceral emotion (a politics of rage) and the Remain campaign as the continuation of 'normal' (i.e., rational, considered, or even calculating) politics. On the contrary, the Remain campaign, dubbed "Project Fear" by its opponents, sought to evoke anxiety and anger about the risks of leaving the EU (and marshalled heavy weaponry to generate such anxiety). The diverse attachments to Europe and the EU that motivated Remain votes were often, and explicitly, weighed against the problems of the actually existing EU (especially after the handling of the Greece crisis) and of entering into the unholy alliance that voting Remain involved. And, in the aftermath of the referendum, a turbulent mixture of anxieties, anger and despair have all been part of what Ben Anderson calls the 'affective atmospheres' of current British politics.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, however, it is worth stressing the temporary nature of the Leave and Remain alliances. Despite the identifications and animosities of Leave versus Remain persisting into the present political and cultural landscape (after 18 months), their stability as political formations – blocs or alliances – remains in doubt.<sup>27</sup> The 2017 General Election, resulting in the return of a Conservative Party to government but without an overall majority, saw very different alliances constructed as voting turn out increased (especially among the young) and was marked by a return to two party voting (Labour and Conservative) with other parties being squeezed (particularly the Liberal Democrats and UKIP).. The Conservative party failed to deliver the promises of 'strong and stable' government while the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn mobilised a new alliance that was articulated around different frustrations and senses of loss. Certainly, some of these concerned the problems of work degradation and precarity (and the corporate power underlying these changes) but the campaign also addressed the 'loss of the social', promising to enlarge and revive the public realm (in public services, transport and more). In short, conjunctural analysis offers a way of thinking about the shifting political projects, blocs and alliances that contend the current moment.

### **Conclusion: looking for the conjuncture**

I have tried to sketch the ways in which a conjunctural analysis might illuminate the moment of Brexit. This is no more than a sketch, since tracing the different dynamics and forces that come together to constitute the conjuncture is a substantial challenge and one unlikely to be accomplished by a single author within the confines of a journal article. I have argued elsewhere that the work of conjunctural analysis is probably only sustainable as a collaborative practice.<sup>28</sup> But this sketch is intended to indicate what can be gained from thinking conjuncturally: the different trajectories and temporalities that intersect, and are condensed in, the conjuncture; the multiple social fractures, antagonisms and contradictions that accumulate; the social forces that they animate and the political practices of articulation that mobilise – and de-mobilise – such forces. In particular, I think it is productive to think conjuncturally about the emotional conditions or affective moods that circulate in, and are held to characterise, the present moment. The widely discussed ‘sense of loss’ associated with contemporary populist movements can productively be viewed as an image that condenses multiple experiences of loss, articulating some and silencing others. For me, this approach brings both analytical and political gains over the simplifications of ‘epochal analysis’ – and is to be treasured as Stuart Hall’s difficult gift to cultural studies.

---

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp 121-22.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Grossberg ‘Wrestling with the Angels of Cultural Studies’ in Julian Henriques, David Morley and Vana Goblot (eds) *Stuart Hall: Conversations, Projects and Legacies*. London: Goldsmiths Press, 2017, pp. 107-117; John Clarke, ‘Conjunctures, crises and cultures: Valuing Stuart Hall’ *Focaal*, 70, pp 113-122.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey, ‘Interpreting the crisis’. In R. Grayson and J. Rutherford (Eds.), *After the crash: Re-inventing the left in Britain*. Soundings in collaboration with the Social Liberal Forum and Compass. London: Lawrence and Wishart e-book, 2010, pp 37-46, p38.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Bob Jessop ‘What follows Fordism? On the Periodisation of Capitalism and its Regulation’. in R. Albritton et al. (eds) *Phases of Capitalist Development: Booms, Crises, and Globalization*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001:282-299. Online version: <https://bobjessop.org/2014/01/03/what-follows-fordism-on-the-periodisation-of-capitalism-and-its-regulation/>. See also Mark Hayward (ed.) *Cultural Studies and Finance Capitalism: the Economic Crisis and After*. London and New York, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Streeck, “Social Democracy’s Last Rounds.” *Jacobin: Reason in Revolt*. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/wolfgang-streeck-europe-eurozone-austerity-neo-liberalism-social-democracy/>; Jeremy Gilbert, ‘Disaffected consent: that post-democratic feeling’ *Soundings: a journal of politics and culture: Issue 60, Summer 2015*, pp. 29-41

<sup>6</sup> Paul Gilroy *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Ghassan Hage *White Nation: fantasies of White supremacy in a multicultural society*, New York: Routledge, 2000; and *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*, London Merlin Press.

<sup>8</sup> These arguments are developed more fully in John Clarke ‘Of crises and conjunctures: The Problem of the Present’ *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 34 (4), pp337-354, 2010; and ‘Finding place in the conjuncture: a dialogue with Doreen’. In Peck, J. et al (eds) *Doreen Massey – Critical Dialogues*. London: Agenda Publishing, forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> Michele Filippini *Using Gramsci: A New Approach*. London: Pluto Press, 2017, p109.

<sup>10</sup> See, *inter alia*, John Clarke and Janet Newman ‘People in this country have had enough of experts’: Brexit and the paradoxes of populism.’ *Critical Policy Studies*:2017: online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2017.1282376>.

- 
- <sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Signification, representation, ideology: Althusser and the post-structuralist debate.' *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2(2), 91–114. doi:10.1080/15295038509360070, 1985, pp 113–114, footnote 2.
- <sup>12</sup> Harding, "Contribution to 'Where are We Now? Responses to the Referendum'." *London Review of Books* 38 (14): 12. See also J.D. Taylor 'The working class revolts' *New Statesman*, 7 February. 2017 <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/02/working-class-revolts>.
- <sup>13</sup> See, for example, Pankaj Mishra *The Age of Anger: A History of the Present*. London: Penguin Books, 2017.
- <sup>14</sup> John B. Judis *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession transformed American and European Politics*. New York, Columbia Global Reports, 2016, p 17.
- <sup>15</sup> See Sophie Bjork-James and Jeff Maskovsky (eds) *Fed Up: Angry Publics and New Politics*, West Virginia University Press, forthcoming.
- <sup>16</sup> Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham: 'Changing the Subject: Judith Butler's Politics of Radical Resignification' in Olson and Worsham (eds) *The Politics of Possibility: Encountering the Radical Imagination*. Routledge 2017, first published in 2007 by Paradigm Publishers, pp 27-28.
- <sup>17</sup> See the important arguments from James Ferguson and Tania Li about work and livelihoods: *Beyond the "Proper Job": Political-economic Analysis after the Century of Labouring Man*. Working Paper 51, PLAAS, UWC, Cape Town, 2018.
- <sup>18</sup> Sean Illing 'Why the white working class feels like they've lost it all, according to a political scientist.' <https://www.vox.com/conversations/2016/12/21/14023688/donald-trump-white-working-class-republican-democrats-justin-gest>
- <sup>19</sup> Tim Adams, David Lammy Interview. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jul/02/david-lammy-mp-grenfell-tower-interview-blair-brown-black>; see also John Clarke 'Back to the future? Reclaiming the social after Grenfell Tower' <http://www.social-policy.org.uk/50-for-50/reclaiming-social/> 2017.
- <sup>20</sup> See the discussion in Gurminder K. Bhambra 'Brexit, Trump, and 'methodological whiteness': on the misrecognition of race and class' *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 68 S1, pp S214-S232, 2017.
- <sup>21</sup> Karen Ho 'Markets, myths, and misrecognitions: Economic populism in the age of financialization and hyperinequality' *Economic Anthropology*, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/sea2.12112/full>; 2018, 149.
- <sup>22</sup> See, inter alia, Sara Ahmed "Not in the Mood." *New Formations* 82: 13–28. doi:10.3898/NeWF.82.01.2014; Ben Anderson "Neoliberal Affects." *Progress in Human Geography* XXX, pp1–20, 2015; Kirsten Forkert *Austerity as Public Mood*. London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2017; Larry Grossberg *Under the Cover of Chaos: Trump and the battle for the American Right*. London, Pluto Press, 2018 and Margaret Wetherell, 'Feeling rules, atmospheres and affective practices: some reflections on the analysis of emotional episodes', in Claire Maxwell and Peter Aggleton (eds) *Privilege, agency and affect: understanding the production and effects of action*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013., pp221–39.
- <sup>23</sup> See Clarke and Newman, *op.cit.*, Danny Dorling 'Brexit: the decision of a divided country' <http://www.dannydorling.org/?p=5568>, 2016 and David Edgar 'Labour can fight for working people without dumping progressive ideals' *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/04/labourfight-for-working-people-progressive-ideas>.
- <sup>24</sup> Insa Koch 'What's in a vote? Brexit beyond culture wars'. *American Ethnologist*: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/amet.12472/full>, 2017.
- <sup>25</sup> Allan Cochrane 'From Brexit to the Break-up of Britain' Paper presented to the *Audit UK* Workshop, Centre for British Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin, 27-9 September 2017.

---

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, *op. cit.*; see also Daniel Knight ‘Anxiety and cosmopolitan futures: Brexit and Scotland’ *American Ethnologist*: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/amet.12474/full>, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> See, *inter alia*, David Edgar “We thought Homo Brexitus was the future, but he isn’t winning any more” <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/28/postwar-progressive-alliance-labour-corbynomics>

<sup>28</sup> John Clarke “Doing the Dirty Work” The Challenges of Conjunctural Analysis. In Julian Henriques, David Morley and Vana Goblot (eds) *Stuart Hall: Conversations, Projects and Legacies*. London: Goldsmiths Press, pp. 79-86; 2017.