ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Liberalism and critical Marxism: a reply to Glasman and Rutherford

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Abstract

In this reply to Maurice Glasman and Jonathan Rutherford's response to the authors' earlier critical comparison of Corbynism and Blue Labour, the authors clarify and further develop three core components of the original critique, covering, respectively, (1) identity politics and identity liberalism; (2) agonism and abstraction; and (3) Marxism and liberalism. First, the authors reconceptualise the forms of left identity politics and 'identity liberalism' criticised by Glasman and Rutherford as struggles 'in and against' identification, the fluidity of which is not found in the forms of national belonging prioritised by Blue Labour. Second, the authors suggest that there is an absence of any notion of mediation in the agonistic mode of politics espoused by Glasman and Rutherford, and that this precludes an accurate conceptualisation of capitalism as a global system of abstract and indirect social domination to which a simple restoration of national or popular sovereignty around issues such as Brexit and immigration poses no solution. Third, the authors clarify the claim that the liberal centre must be pessimistically defended at a time of its crisis, drawing upon the 'articles of reconciliation' between Marxism and liberalism proposed in the work of the late Norman Geras.

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Introduction

We read with interest the considered reply received from two architects of Blue Labour, one of the targets of our article's critique. Maurice and Jonathan's response provides some useful clarifications and further development of key aspects of Blue Labour thinking that some among the latter's more recent converts might do well to take on board. They contend that the common good is about the negotiation and not the liquidation of 'estranged interests', and that any national popular project would not abolish antagonism but construct itself through dissensus and pluralism. They stress that the rhetorical category of the so-called 'white working class' is not one for which Blue Labour especially cares, and that culture is not something fixed but everchanging. Sovereignty, for them, is more complex than a simplistic and impossible 'control', and their patriotism rests not in isolationism but as an internationalist impulse of self-determination and solidarity. Moreover, they are 'liberal' in the sense espoused by the eighteenth-century British enlightenment, and not in the universalising European tradition of Hegel et al within which our work is broadly grounded. They also reaffirm perhaps Blue Labour's biggest selling points, which are, respectively, the commitment to a politics of paradox attuned to the persistence of contradiction and the critique of commodification as a negative *process* of social domination, rather than something enforced or endured by vying groups.

In these respects, Maurice and Jonathan represent that part of Blue Labour that, until Corbynism came along, occupied a lonely position in the Labour Party's intellectual life trying to eke out the rudiments of a politically practicable philosophical orientation capable of capturing capitalism critically. Whilst we do not share the external standpoint that Blue Labour assumes in making this critique—shortly, in the name of the nation (or national culture) against the commodifying forces of global capital—the enterprise was, for the most part, a welcome beacon of thoughtfulness in a party otherwise gradually desiccating in cynical political calculation. Of course, Corbynism has now arrived with a whole slew of new thinkers and ideas capable, within major constraints, of comprehending aspects of capitalist society halfway critically—sometimes, as we suggest in the paper, adopting very similar standpoints to those assumed by Blue Labour, with which we also differ. But the point stands that Blue Labour showed a willingness to engage in serious intellectual work at a time where it was deeply unfashionable to do so, before Corbynism's heady theoretical constitution reinvigorated the resources on which the left and centre-left can draw. Indeed, Corbynism's direction of travel in recent months suggests a more substantive and practical crossover between the two positions.

We are all to some extent powerless to curate how ideas are received. The high priesthood of Corbynism cannot contain the occasionally overzealous members and supporters who mobilise around Corbyn online and In Real Life. Meanwhile, Blue Labour finds itself in surprising rude health considering the absence of any clear channel of influence or factional base in a shifting Labour Party. This has been sustained by bringing together a set of divergent political projects,

aspirations and interests that each place different emphases on contemporary events and express apparently popular impulses in different ways. There is the Blue Labour that contains the seeds of an emancipatory cultural and political-economic critique of commodification and abstraction. It is in this space that Maurice and Jonathan have typically operated, along with many of their like-minded thinkers. But like the uncontainable elements within the Corbynist flock, Blue Labour gains at least some of its continuing salience, even as its direct political presence is on the wane, from those drawn to the project because of its perceived status as a locus for a certain reactionary orientation to questions of identity, migration and nationhood that has become increasingly assertive in the wake of the rise of the right in recent years. Here the subtlety and thoughtfulness of Maurice and Jonathan's response is disregarded in favour of claims to better and worse forms of authenticity and belonging, conveniently burnished with intellectual kudos by pop-academic bestsellers warning against the dangers of the wrong kind of identity, or, even, the dangers posed by those citizens of nowhere who possess none at all (e.g. Goodhart 2017).

The question is whether Blue Labour provides an intellectual environment that incubates any of this, and whether those viable elements of the project that Maurice and Jonathan raise in their response can be rescued from the implication of many of its core ideas in a political context quite different from when Blue Labour began. Whilst the more scholarly and sophisticated quarters of Blue Labour place subtler stresses than some advocates, there is nonetheless a necessity to idiot-proof ideas against their misappropriation in an age of extremes. To take one example, Maurice and Jonathan are justifiably wary of our apparent but unstated and entirely unintended insinuation that Blue Labour shares some affinity with the Vichy romanticisation of '*Travail, famille, patrie*'. We did not have this in mind, but it has to be said that such appeals are somewhat undermined by the Blue Labour website carrying as its header the slogan 'Work, Family, Community'. With the gentler 'Community' standing in for 'Fatherland', this is an almost precise English translation of the tripartite motto of the collaborationist regime in France, which temporarily replaced the altogether more agreeable and continuingly relevant revolutionary watchword '*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*'. Whilst we did not, and do not, seek to insinuate any connection between Blue Labour and Vichy, the choice of words here is obscure and coincidental enough to suggest such a comparison, had we chosen to make it, would be overly strong but not entirely without foundation. All good intentions aside, it demonstrates how carefully this territory must be treaded.

Blue Corbynism

The above example is just one instance of a number where Maurice and Jonathan suggest we are guilty of misunderstanding or misrepresenting Blue Labour thinking. Now, it must be said that in the perspicuous way Maurice and Jonathan present them, the core ideas of Blue Labour both move some way past how Blue Labour thinking is appropriated in the wider public and political sphere, and sometimes appear in a quite different light than our critical reconstruction of them allowed. Critique, which

rests on critical reconstruction as a means of getting inside its object, is commonly met with the riposte that the ideas critiqued have been represented inaccurately. It is a permanent peril of the critical method and we have been charged with as much in this case. But the critical purposes to which we put the discussion of Blue Labour in our original piece—in order to highlight points of convergence with the Corbynist current to which it claims to constitute the only coherent alternative—remain intact in spite of any clarifications on the part of its proponents.

Interestingly, in the days after Maurice and Jonathan's response was initially published, news emerged, by way of a *New Statesman* profile of John McDonnell, that Labour's Shadow Chancellor had perceived enough shared ground with at least some tenets of Blue Labour to hold policy discussions with Lord Glasman (Eaton 2018). According to the report, McDonnell kicked things off with the question, characteristic of the intellectual curiosity that sets him apart from Corbyn, 'where do we disagree?' This followed the launch of the 'Full Brexit', bringing key Blue Labour figures together with other Lexiteers constituting an increasingly assertive and influential presence in the Corbyn movement.[1] Meanwhile, on the continent, Wolfgang Streeck was among the founding signatories to *Aufstehen*, a new anti-migrant left movement inspired in equal measure by the appropriation of ideas from Blue Labour and organisational politics from Momentum (Oltermann 2018). Back in the UK, there has been a remarkable convergence between how Blue Labour outriders and the younger 'luxury communism' wing of the Corbyn left grasp the relationship between Brexit, neoliberalism, globalisation and immigration. A pro-Brexit op-ed even popped up in the Stalinist *Morning Star* bearing the byline of one Maurice Glasman (Glasman 2018).

Of course, regardless of their consequences, these coincidences between Blue Labour and Corbynism in themselves prove nothing more than the capacity of people from different political traditions to converse, combine ideas, change their minds and move within ideological contradictions. But this does not mean that the sometimes surprising configurations between Corbynist and Blue Labour positions, especially in light of the latter's claim to be implacably opposed to the former, do not warrant further explanation and interrogation. And this is what our article sought to do. Indeed, it might be said that the resonances of our critique have increased lately, as Corbynism, in at least one of the poses it strikes on Brexit, has come to adopt a much more nationalist orientation on questions of sovereignty, specifically around state aid and free movement (Bolton and Pitts 2018b). Corbynism's desire for the 'national economy' extolled by Blue Labour has become ever more pronounced and is increasingly expressed through the same evocation of a lost cultural tradition. A 'Build It In Britain' campaign promised to repatriate the 'thousands of jobs' the Conservative government 'have sent overseas' (Labour Party 2018a). Another artfully shot campaign video, released immediately after the party's 2018 conference, saw Labour promise to 'rebuild Britain' and restore local 'pride', over footage of terraced houses, cobbled streets and shuttered factories (Labour Party 2018b). Far from Corbynism setting its electoral sights solely on what Maurice and Jonathan term

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[1] https://www.thefullbrexit.com/.

the 'socially liberal', with all their 'snobbish progressivism', the party leadership's steadfast refusal to challenge the nationalist logic of Brexit—in the face of concerted opposition from those who 'Love Corbyn' but 'Hate Brexit'—demonstrates how the tables have turned since the days of New Labour. Where once the 'traditional working class' were deemed to have 'nowhere else to go', allowing Labour to focus on the 'aspirational' and the 'progressive', now it is the latter who find themselves without a voice in Brexit Britain, whilst parties on all sides compete to deliver to the rooted 'somewheres' the fabled 'control' economic protectionism will supposedly supply.

In spite of all protestations, this opens up common ground between Corbynism and Blue Labour that the signs suggest some are already wittingly or unwittingly beginning to exploit. Whether this pleases partisans of either is another question, and it will give both sides something to reflect upon about their respective political projects. But the main purpose of our critique was to highlight the possibility or necessity of an alternative to both Corbynism and Blue Labour, and not accept at face value the claim that the only intellectual choice confronting those lost in the contemporary Labour Party is between one of those two competing tendencies. Nothing in the Brexit-dominated political landscape has served to dull the compulsion to establish such an alternative.

Identity and identification

These wider observations aside, there are a few elements of Maurice and Jonathan's response that we would like to address specifically. First, a point of textual propriety. Maurice and Jonathan assert that nowhere does any Blue Labour writer use the term 'primary community' or 'primary communities' in a positive sense, but our citation of this term derives from Rowan Williams's preface to a 2015 collection of Blue Labour writings (Williams 2015). If the former Archbishop of Canterbury is not quite a paid-up member of the Blue Labour tendency, then his words should still be taken as an endorsement of something he has seen, like us, as an assumption active in Blue Labour thinking: that there is some ontological privilege given to some ways of relating to one another above other kinds of relation.

This recurring theme comes up in Maurice and Jonathan's response. Parsing the forms of liberalism to which they do and do not subscribe, Maurice and Jonathan critique 'identity liberalism', posing it against a politics of 'belonging'. It is worth lingering on what is meant by 'identity liberalism' in this context, as there is something of a contradiction at play here. We assume that the term is taken from the work of the American sociologist Mark Lilla, who uses it to criticise what he regards as the tendency among the contemporary US left to view society solely thorough a fragmented prism of essentialised identity categories—race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc (Lilla 2016). He argues that the one identity which is not given a place in the contemporary left's taxonomy of identity categories is precisely that constituency which is the focus of Blue Labour's agenda—socially conservative, patriotic, culturally 'working class'. We can surmise that whiteness is the other missing identity here, although this is unstated.

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Lilla's critique of 'identity liberalism' is that by solely focusing on these supposedly closed, static categories of identity, by demanding that members of each category should 'stay in their lane', the shared social experiences and histories that overlap and blur the lines between categories are ignored. That old aim of the left, the possibility of building a truly concrete universality—not a universality that oppresses or wipes out particularity, or fixes it in place, but one that gives it the freedom to be expressed and recombined in new forms within a shared space of commonality and solidarity—is hereby lost (see Baumann 2011). This opens the door to reactionary appeals to a 'white identity' which feels under threat from the rise of the 'other' and demands its own separate status. Lilla's solution is a reinvigorated universalism, in which civic education and knowledge of the inextricably entwined and mutually constitutive open histories of supposedly isolated categories replaces the fixation on separation, essentialism and closure.

In Maurice and Jonathan's telling, however, the influence of 'identity liberalism' on the contemporary left does not lead to an overly particularistic depiction of the world and the loss of the possibility of concrete universality. It is the exact opposite. The left is here condemned for its rejection of the 'particular and the historical in favour of the abstract and universal'. As such it has assisted in the production of a 'liberal culture that transcends particular places and time and which becomes a deracinated and standardised mono-culture'. The answer is therefore to reject the universal and return to the particular, to the rooted cultural traditions of Blue Labour's chosen constituency. Unlike Lilla, there is no recognition of the necessity of the universal here, no acknowledgement that it is precisely in the tension between the particular and the universal that the possibility of the 'common good' they pursue lies, rather than in the elimination of the latter by the former. Far from offering an alternative to the worst excesses of 'identity liberalism', the totalising particularity offered here merely reproduces it in a new form.

There is no reason why the identifications at stake in 'identity liberalism' should be any less meaningful or significant than the alternative categories of 'belonging' on which Blue Labour dines—nationality, class as a cultural location, faith. Class is not a cultural location in which one sits, but a socially constituted relationship between people and the world around them. Nationhood is just as socially constructed as any other basis for claims on 'identity', but far less politically repurposable. Identity politics is not—or does not *have* to be—reducible to a 'politics of position' that confers positive or negative status upon whosoever is speaking owing to who they are (Hirsh 2017). Those forms of identity politics that recognise social construction and move within that space bear the merit of emphasising the fluidity of identification as a process of active struggle to define and redefine oneself and one's relationship with the world, in a spirit of mutual recognition of unity-in-difference. This is a little like how Maurice and Jonathan present their understanding of belonging as something built out of negotiation and mediation of individual interests. They permit of such fluidity in the terms they use to characterise culture as something not organic but subject to contestation and creation. At its best and most intersectional, 'identity liberalism' does and enables much the same.

Indeed, by recognising the struggle inherent in the process of identification, against fixity and in favour of fluidity, it is actually so-called 'identity liberalism'

that complements underlying forms of solidarity and collective life linked not to the 'political nations' that divide us, but the unity-in-difference—the ever-shifting concrete universal—that consists in humanity's capacity, positive and negative, for self-determination, suffering and so on. There is always therefore a struggle in-against-and-beyond identification (Stoetzler 2009; Holloway 2009) in these purportedly 'liberal' forms of identity politics, insofar as they work with categories only to continually remould them and, by exposing them as contingent and socially constituted, highlight the shared humanity that remains unshifting at their core irrespective of nation or state. A revolt against 'classification' itself (Holloway 2002), class struggle exemplifies this, fighting not to revel in class society but to abolish it for a world of human unity-in-difference. Gender, race and sexuality, too: all know no nation except where they are forced into it by those who would seek to subordinate both solidarity and particularity to the apparently superior forms of belonging available by way of the nation, state or locality. The freedom to critique, to re-examine, reconfigure, and even leave behind elements of the ascribed 'position' into which one was born is a freedom that had to be struggled towards for centuries. It is a freedom of which large parts of the globe are still deprived. The loss of an undifferentiated, simplistic, immediate unity with the world carries with it the possibility of uncertainty, confusion and isolation, for sure. But it is also the first step towards a complex, concrete form of ethical life in which the particular and universal restlessly combine and recombine to create new forms of collective flourishing and fulfilment.

There is no reason, on this rationale, why Blue Labour's entirely admirable conceptualisation of the 'common good' could not be applied above and beyond the localistic units of 'belonging' on which the whole narrative hinges. Why should the common good coincide with the 'political nation'—say, the UK, or, in some imaginaries, England—and not a wider institutional terrain capable of sustaining experimentation and innovation in transnational forms of citizenship? Something, perhaps, like the EU? Indeed, somewhere in the heritage of the 'common good' on the Labour centre-left and the prehistory of Blue Labour is Jon Cruddas's work with Compass and the German SPD in the early part of the decade, which gestured towards conceptualisations of the 'good society' irreducible to application to one form of 'belonging' above others, taking Europe as its canvas to go beyond the nation and across rather than within borders (Cruddas and Nahles 2009). Maurice and Jonathan pinpoint EU immigration law as a key infringement of the sovereignty of 'political nations'—but, like the state aid restrictions that also accompany single market membership (and which is proving the main issue at stake in Corbyn's stance on Brexit), it might better be seen as precisely such a transnational vision of the common good, equally distributing the gains and consequences of immigration within and between both migrants and their host nations alike, protecting against the intra-state competition and migrant exploitation that would accompany a nationalist war of all against all. Whilst within a given national territory these effects might be experienced or felt differently at different regional levels—indeed, this is some of what was behind the Brexit vote (see Eichengreen 2018)—such interventions exemplify an experimental if unsatisfactory attempt at a post-national common good, on which now some, if not all, quarters of Blue Labour are hardly alone in calling time. Indeed, it might be argued that some of the problems of the EU stem from the failure

to develop this transnational experiment to its full extent, particularly in the political sphere, where the absence of an established European demos or public has played into the distorted narratives pushed by the nationalist right. Extending the right to vote in national elections to all inhabitants of a particular nation, for example, may well have prevented successive governments pinning the blame for their political and economic travails on the presence of European migrants, and assisted the process of building solidarity between domestic and EU workers.

Abstraction and agonism

Maurice and Jonathan's opposition to Britain's continued membership of the EU rests on two grounds. The first is that the European project represents a distinct continental cultural and political tradition derived from 'Napoleonic states' incommensurate with that which can be traced back to the origins of the Common Law in England. The second is that the EU represents the limitation of politics—the latter here the 'agonistic' ideal type conceptualised by Chantal Mouffe—by legality (Mouffe 2000).

On the first count, the divisions within the Blue Labour camp itself when it comes to the question of Britain (or England's) relationship with Europe speak to the difficulties of isolating a single 'authentic' tradition against which all others must be judged. Moreover, the idea that Brexit can be explained, at least in part, by reference to a singular cultural tradition running in unbroken fashion all the way back to the Norman invasion undermines the welcome emphasis on political contestation, plurality and open history which underpins Maurice and Jonathan's response. Even if Blue Labour's framework of cultural tradition and shared meanings is accepted on its own terms, it seems just as plausible to understand the construction of the EU as a transnational institutional response to the common experience of the catastrophes of the twentieth century—an experience which continues to dominate British cultural memory—as it does to present it as an alien Bonapartist imposition. Similarly, given that the main determinant of a vote to Remain or Leave was not income, occupation, or geographic location but rather *age*—with those under 49 voting overwhelmingly to remain (and those only now of voting age even more emphatic) and those over 50 choosing to leave—it seems that whilst there may 'never [have] been enthusiasm for the EEC or EU in England', this tradition of indifference and/or hostility is undergoing a process of transition (Goulard 2016). A genuinely open and pluralistic approach to questions of culture would take this into account rather than call upon the ghosts of Waterloo or Henry II to justify a rejectionist position.

The second plank of Maurice and Jonathan's argument for Brexit is the EU's suppression of the moment of 'the political'. They suggest this rule of the legal over the political is played out most notably in how immigration has allegedly been moved from the political to the legal sphere in the UK, partly by the apparent imposition of the EU framework for freedom of movement. This, they claim, places free speech at threat. But, with immigration as with all the other things we are told cannot be talked about by those who feel their free speech at threat, the things we supposedly do not or cannot speak enough about are often precisely what we hear far too

much of. For years now, across every airwave and printed media, we have heard seldom little else beyond the production and reproduction of 'legitimate concerns' about immigration and immigrants—whether by the public, politicians, the press or souring intellectuals. If the legal really is policing and circumscribing the agonistic political, it does not appear to be doing a good job. That is, indeed, if 'agonism' can even be applied to a debate so rancorous that the side one would wager most willing to defend working-class solidarity with workers from other countries has ceded the terrain from compliant fear of anti-immigrant sentiment. This is a situation that preceded the Brexit referendum and has so worsened since that even the supposedly pro-migrant Leader of the Labour Party rolls in its undertow.

Perhaps it would be preferable to return to the time where New Labour and the novel legal niceties of EU integration bottled up and kept pressed deeply underground some of the same sentiments about migration we now see traded daily by politicians of both right and, regrettably, left. But now they are out of the bottle it will be hard to put the stopper shut again. Why should those whose identity politics rest on the reactionary othering of outsiders have their grievances taken at face value by lettered ventriloquists, but those whose identities are rooted only in the search to reflexively self-determine and make and remake themselves be treated to the scepticism that attends 'identity liberalism' among contemporary political milieus of the right and left? Appeasing it will not reduce the risk of combustion, as exemplified in the nasty tenor of the immigration conversation, the acceptance into the bosom of polite debate tribunes for popular prejudice, and the spiralling surge of actual and attempted far-right violence and terror against migrants and prominent pro-migrant political figures. It has to be said that in at least facing up to the reality that all is not well, especially among those who feel some perceived grievance around immigration, Blue Labour bests those from elsewhere on the left who see economic remedies alone as an easy means to neutralise this sense of grievance and all hold hands together in the ever after. Maurice and Jonathan are correct to assert the absence of any politically operationalizable utopianism in Blue Labour's theoretical constitution. But this can sometimes lapse not into a radical pessimism capable of confronting and defeating the rising far-right but rather a cynicism that, instead of critically challenging their sentiments, reduces politics to their unmediated reflection through the posing of 'popular' sovereignty against parliamentary and legal abstraction.

Here Blue Labour espouses a similar 'agonistic' mode of politics some parts of Corbynism lay claim to, in the latter case largely derived from Chantal Mouffe's conceptualisation of a left populist tradition she places Corbynism within (Mouffe 2018). Interestingly, Maurice and Jonathan seek to set Blue Labour apart from Corbynism on the basis of the latter's 'hard left' politics, even though they contend the latter is 'not a coherent political philosophy'. We would differ strongly on both the degree of agonism and the coherence present in Corbynism as it is current constituted (Bolton and Pitts 2018a). Whilst there is a great deal of internal dissonance between different strands of the piecemeal electoral and intellectual coalition constructed under Corbyn's leadership, the one thing that does manage to hold the whole thing together is the agonistic politics that poses a morally virtuous and populistic 'community of the good' centred on Corbyn's own incorruptibility against an opposing pole of a scheming and morally bereft elite (Hirsh 2015). This not only

holds the project together, but grants Corbynism much of its political dynamism, however limited that may pan out to be in the long run. What else is this than agonism in its classic sense?

Funnily enough, rather than a complement to agonism, it is precisely the commitment to pluralism Maurice and Jonathan express elsewhere in their response that is necessary to withstand and combat the populist politics that today unites left and right alike, in which anti-elite posturing is substituted for what could otherwise be an effective anti-capitalist praxis. Identity politics, where it represents fluid notions of identification as a social process against totalitarian or totalising forms of identity as a fixed characteristic or group membership, can be as much an aid to such pluralism as an obstacle. It is not always the ally of agonism it appears when draped in national flags and reactionary cultural and ethnic affiliations. But, rather than an antagonistic politics of class—not an identity, but rather a relation—or other forms of contested identification forged through struggle, both Corbynism and Blue Labour construct an agonistic duality around the interests of a popular subject or sovereignty and those imposed by outside forces arraigned around the regulatory and economic relations of global capital.

For Maurice and Jonathan, just as contemporary cosmopolitan liberalism subordinates politics to law, Brexit marks the point at which the long subordination of popular to parliamentary sovereignty comes to an end. This is not dissimilar to the spirit of Labour's approach to Brexit under the leadership of Corbyn and McDonnell. McDonnell set the path of travel when, shortly after the referendum, he promised extraparliamentary 'moral pressure … across the country' (Rampen 2016) would be enough to dictate the terms on which the UK would leave the EU. Labour have not only paid lip service to the mythical 'popular will' in its policy orientation under Corbyn, but actively rallied behind its distorted representation as determinedly pro-Brexit at crucial points in the progress of the issue through the parliamentary system.

There is a shared assumption active in both Blue Labour and Corbynism, in the oppositions posed between the political and the legal, between the popular and the parliamentary, between the universal and the particular, that appears to either elide or abhor mediation and demand from their respective agonistic modes of doing and thinking politics the increasingly unmediated expression and confrontation of opposing political forces and principles. Sometimes this is concealed in wider calls for the defence of free speech, sometimes, as in Corbynism, it is expressed in assaults on the spirit of open criticism and scepticism that characterise the best traditions of liberal democracy and a free media. Either way, the problem here is that the populist requirement for the popular will to resound in as unmediated and unlimited a manner as possible. In another world, perhaps—but not this one, and certainly not now, at this political moment. Mediation not only permeates but characterises human society, specifically in the forms of mediation associated with capitalist society and the liberal democratic order with which it has been associated: state, commodity, money, labour, law. These are the modes of existence assumed by human practice and social relations in capitalist society, and the means by which they proceed and unfold—hence they are *real* abstractions, and not something false that can be simply stripped away to reveal an unmediated concrete reality underneath. The search for a world free of mediation is futile,

only better and worse forms of it feasible. In a highly complex and irreversibly global society riven by contradictions, the desire for popular will without mediation, representation and institutional or legal form, or, for that matter, technological progress without social or political constraints, is dangerous because unattainable, and it is from this unattainability that the desire derives its peculiar political dynamism.

The absence of a concept of mediation through which the abstract totality of capitalist society can be captured, and the forms of existence human relations assume can be understood, has wider consequences for both Blue Labour and Corbynism. In their response to our article, Maurice and Jonathan state plainly that 'Blue Labour does not understand capitalism as an abstraction'—whereas we do, but only insofar as it is a *real* abstraction rooted and constituted in concrete social relations (see Sohn-Rethel 1978). Regardless, for Blue Labour capitalism is characterised by the prevalence of the 'national economic system', or, in other words, 'a cultural and material set of mutual institutions that govern a national economy'. This institutionalist line of thinking, like all such apparatuses up to and including its most famous appearance in the 'varieties of capitalism' literature, stresses too much the possibility for national divergence within global capitalism and not enough the essential social relations and social forms that find their differential mediation in different national circumstances, principally through the state as itself a form within which the contradictions of capitalist social relations are sublated at a specific stage in their development. The essential and inescapable factor here is capital as an intrinsically *global* social relation between people and things—an *abstract* totality validated as money but constituted in human practice that is only *mediated* differently in and by the state-based 'national economic systems' that constitute the core of the Blue Labour analysis. Once again, the particular is treated in isolation from the universal, rather than the one existing through the other.

Indeed, it is the reluctance to face up to the intractable reduction of all life to the workings of the global capitalist economy that leads both Blue Labour and Corbynism into the wishful thinking of Lexit, where all the UK has to do is opt out for sovereign control to be restored. The refusal both of mediation and the salience of what is mediated is akin to the aforementioned inability to see identity politics as, at its best and where not segregated, essentialist or ontological, the working out of processes of identification, in-against-and-beyond identity itself, that in shifting times and places mediate without resolution the human unity-in-difference that is the basis for any true 'common good'. In spite of the seeming intentions of those on all sides of the debate, there is no necessary agonism or opposition here, only mediation— or rather, the longed-for agonism is only possible within and through the mediated form of concrete universality, if it is not to descend into the mutual destruction of culture war.

Articles of reconciliation

Maurice and Jonathan close by expressing their interest in knowing more about our 'undefined philosophical alternative of 'critical Marxism' that we claim 'would be capable of 'holding the centre'. To clarify, we are not sure that an academic 'critical

Marxism' can singlehandedly 'hold the centre'. But it may act as a theoretical orientation supporting and informing a politics that could, for the time being at least, set itself this practical task. This response-to-the-response may have already shed more light on our thinking, specifically around the significance of concepts like mediation to how we understand society and how we critically reconstruct the way others understand society. But, by way of conclusion, we will outline a little more what such a critical alternative might consist of. Maurice and Jonathan nicely capture some part of it with their own positive characterisation of what they think it might mean: 'a politics that deepens both democracy and liberty within a framework of shared civic institutions', a 'democratic and ethical socialism' that seeks to 'redistribute power and constrain the domination of both market and state'. This is all good, and there is no doubt common ground. But there is more to say.

To some extent, our proposal of a critical Marxist concord with the liberal centre at a time of its crisis is out of recognition that a 'holding pattern' is necessary in the wake of a rightwards swing precipitated by the rise of nativist populism, and pending any meaningfully transformative, electorally dynamic alternative. But it also reflects a theoretical disposition and political orientation best captured, perhaps, in the work of the late Norman Geras, for whom it was necessary to strike 'articles of reconciliation' between Marxism and key tenets of liberal political theory owing precisely to the lack within the former of any properly worked-out understanding of democracy and the democratic transformation of the world (Geras 2017). Liberalism contains the capacity to partway plug that gap by remedying its cause, which for Marxism is a cynicism about bourgeois democratic rights that sometimes manifests in acquiescence with illiberal and totalitarian modes of governance, as well as populist or majoritarian forms of politics. What a Marxist appropriation of liberal thinking puts forward to fill this void is a normative conceptualisation of human rights, the separation of powers, and pluralist political mediation and representation. These are seen not as inextricably intertwined with and complicit in capitalist society, but rather separable, by degrees, from it, insofar as they set limits on the latter through laws and institutions and can offer more than the purely negative and frequently inequitable constraints liberalism places on property and wealth.

As a bulwark against humanity's greatest evils, such articles of reconciliation also propose positive forms of political responsibility specifically around what Geras defines as a duty of mutual care or aid. For this he draws upon the idea of natural right latent in Marx's work, centred upon an intergenerational shared humanity characterised not by inexhaustible Promethean possibility but rather the presence of human limits, deficiencies and imperfections. Extending positive duties of mutual aid and care on this basis implies the political salience of a 'planetary consciousness' that constructs solidarity not only across, but irrespective of, national borders and takes as its political constituency a global human subject increasingly at threat at a time where the institutional architecture that makes such a subject visible at the international level is breaking down and the wills of national peoples are posed against cosmopolitan 'citizens of nowhere'. The institutional life that liberalism helps guarantee, extended over and beyond borders on the terrain of the global, is part of the scaffolding by which such a constituency can be constructed, and part of 'helping the centre hold' is retaining what little of this remains, in pursuit of wider

transformative social change. This means staying strong against the nativist and nationalist populism that threatens to tear it apart.

Under the cloud of a critical Marxism, the pursuit of transformative social change is laced with pessimism insofar as it must be total but cannot be, and so entails we do what is necessary to hold open the possibility of future emancipation rather than prematurely closing it down in the name of its fulfilment. Geras terms this the pursuit of 'minimum utopia', insofar as human limits are conceptualised as the essence of any universal human subject capable of bringing change about for the better. This means that only such a 'minimum utopia' of guarantees against the worst of things is either realisable or, for that matter, desirable, as the search for abolition of limits and imperfections leads only to untold misery. The abolition of class society and capitalism alone, whilst happy enough an outcome if the conditions are right, is not enough to remove them. There is something, perhaps, in this recognition of intractability that resonates with Blue Labour's best side, that 'politics of paradox' that rests in contradiction and seeks no closure. Indeed, the grounds for likeminded critiques of the totalising aspirations for 'Fully Automated Luxury Communism' (Bastani 2019) and its ilk are clear here, and illustrate the shared convictions and orientations that constitute a vital point of overlap between what we are saying and what Maurice and Jonathan might espouse.

But it is something like a 'politics of paradox' that, right now, recommends the pursuit of an unhappy and pessimistic accommodation with aspects of the centre—a defence of the global, the mediated and the liberal against those on left and right alike who seek to assail them for something better purportedly set on its way by Brexit, Trump and the rest. Whether the global 'neoliberal' order is on the wane and national economies newly resurgent or not, we see no hope in the present political moment, and on this we differ not only from Maurice and Jonathan, but from much of Corbynism too. Maurice's own words aimed at New Labour are worth remembering (Glasman 2016): 'Things don't only get better, they get worse'.

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