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## **Screaming in the Streets**

**WHILST WATCHING** the TV coverage of Donald Trump's inauguration I witnessed a most peculiar and disturbing sight – a grown woman sitting crossed-legged in the middle of a street in Washington screaming and hitting the tarmac with her fists. The other demonstrators were yelling and carrying-on in the usual manner, but it was this wordless anguish that caught my attention. Although her reaction seemed extreme I see it as emblematic of the fear, grief and dismay of the liberal left at this moment in the triumph of reaction.

Wailing and chanting, rioting and demonstrating against the result of an election in which Trump won the electoral college and just under half of the popular vote is an odd reaction from people who usually shoulder themselves to the front of any argument as defenders of the popular will. It appears to be the product of an inability to recognise that we have lost the argument – not because of the gullibility of the masses that disagree with us, or the skulduggery of Vladimir Putin's hackers – but because the respective camps were having entirely different arguments from each other.

Our coherent, rational, and compassionate reasoning flew harmlessly past the pithy slogans, ruggedly down-to-earth concerns, resentments, and brickbats flying in the other direction. It was a dialogue of the deaf without a signer in sight.

Whether it is Brexit, the prospect of Marine Le Pen at the Élysée, or Trump in the Whitehouse, our alarm and horror appears to stem from our raw surprise, our disbelief, that liberal and emancipatory ideas are being challenged in such a forthright and effective manner. This is because we have lulled ourselves into believing that the gains we've made over recent

decades are irreversible – social reaction we thought, if not quite conquered, was inevitably destined to decay and retreat.

How wrong we were.

We were also wrong in imagining that the changed position of women and homosexuals, and the livelier and widespread commitment to anti-racism has been produced by the sanctimonious political correctness lobby, rather than profound structural shifts in the labour market, and changes more broadly in the cultural and social needs of capital.

There is an inescapable relationship between highly developed capitalism and historically unparalleled improvements in the position of women and homosexuals, and in sustained challenges to the subordination of black people, throughout the world. Exactly what it is about highly wrought capitalism that has had this effect on cultural practice and assumptions is not something that most people on the left have given much thought to, preferring instead to attribute all social progress to our own campaigning activity.

In wealthier societies globalisation has resulted in the disintegration of social arrangements that emphasised the communal and class solidarities of dock labour, mining, and manufacturing, and replaced them with relatively small units of production (regardless of the size of the corporation), in both services, logistics, and making things. Unlike older industrial societies, where difference was regarded as destabilising and disruptive, contemporary arrangements derive positive benefit from diversity – from improved communications within small groups of dissimilar people. In these circumstances, attended by the attenuation of collective bargaining and trade unionism, the active participation of staff in the goals of the company – the articulate engagement of the personality of the worker in the success of the enterprise – has placed a premium on communication skills and teamwork.

It is not that the struggles of feminists, or of gay and lesbian activists, and the self-determination and combativeness of black people and communities, has had no effect. They clearly have, but all these trends and movements have derived their impact from circumstances which have been broadly favourable to the reorganisation of capital on a global scale over the last five or six decades.

Emancipatory social developments and related changes in legislation are not the autonomous product of progressive social movements. They have been produced by a concatenation of effects corresponding to the needs of capital and closely connected with strengthening the rights of individuals.

The problem – our problem – has been the extent to which the defence of difference, the defence of our political and cultural commitments, have been associated with globalisation, and the digital economy, which have undermined the opportunities and prospects of those working people left behind by the collapse of rust-bucket industries, of those casualised by the growth of data storage and manipulation, and by the encroachment of robots on the work of living labour.

The paradox in which we find ourselves ensnared is that our thoughts on identity, on feminism, on difference, despite being radical and transformative, are products of the latest incarnation of capital. And, it is now all too apparent that those who have lost out in these transformations have grasped the connection between the sanctimony of the political correctness wallahs of the left, and the forces that have closed down their factories and mills, filled their docklands with upscale apartments, and lectured them on how they should (along with big corporate employers, and rural gangmasters), welcome foreigners into the country in order to participate in the rough and tumble of competition for minimum wage jobs.

The bitterness that Trump, Farage, and Le Pen are stimulating has allowed reactionaries to raise the spectre of a political elite which is contemptuous of the

concerns of ordinary folk – an elite made up of well-heeled experts, of *Guardian* readers, and fashionable metropolitan types, people remote from the blighted landscapes of post industrial decay. These trends have accelerated greatly since the collapse of 2008 and it has proved relatively easy for populist politicians to create a fairly convincing caricature in which the left's respect for difference and social solidarity has become synonymous with disregard for the poor bloody infantry at the bottom of the heap.

It is not true, of course that the left only talks about identity, whilst ignoring the needs and concerns of working people. Even Hilary Clinton spent a great deal of time during the recent election talking about the problems of those in depressed industrial areas, about jobs, and welfare. Similarly, Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell, and the Labour Party, talk endlessly about industrial policy for the woebegone and forgotten regions of the UK. Despite these efforts, their interventions have not persuaded the target audience.

Consequently, recent events have shaken us to the core as many of our assumptions about equality and social solidarity, are revealed as shibboleths, fit only for violation, by the President of the United States, the *Daily Mail* or Nigel Farage. This reversal of our fortunes is substantial and is likely to threaten us for some time to come. It is not simply the havoc that will be caused to women's rights by the US Supreme Court, which is now more likely to introduce greater restrictions on women's control of their own bodies, but the ratification and popularising of a raft of other negative political attitudes from nationalism to the denial of climate change.

Trump's brief speech at the inauguration forcefully emphasised his intension of sticking to his campaign posturing. Like a latter day Benito Mussolini capering on the balcony, Trump offers to star, not in a Silvio Berlusconi farce, but in a great American drama in which the nation is healed by expansion and rebirth, by corporate tax cuts, and massive spending on infrastructure. He plainly believes in the magical force

of his own rhetoric. He also appears to believe that deals between states are akin to deal making between private businesses, where the choice of rivals and alternatives are rather more abundant than they are between sovereign states and global or regional powers – there is after all only one China, only one Germany, only one Mexico. Quite how he proposes to square these particular circles is unclear – as unclear as how he proposes to get small-state Republicans to commit to the wholesale expansion of public spending on welfare, roads, railways, and bridges.

These questions are akin to asking how Trump's administration is going to strengthen innovation and manufacturing investment without using of the latest job-destroying technologies to provide America with the competitive edge it will need in world markets?

Here are conundrums similar to those faced by our enthusiastic free trading Brexiteers who appear to believe that a protectionist America will offer us rich opportunities, while the rest of the world awards us preferential treatment simply because Tory politicians dream of Johnny Foreigner's desire for unfettered access to the UK's home market.

Unfortunately for us on the left, however, the implausibility of Trump's posturing, of Teresa May's plans, or the sinister manoeuvrings of Marine Le Pen, will not result in the decay of their respective political projects. The failure of Trump or Le Pen's protectionism, or of May's robust free trading, will not, automatically result in gains for the left. On the contrary, the failure of the populist right over the next four or five years is likely to produce even greater incoherence and disarray.

Consequently, the left needs to stop anguishing about the benighted masses that voted 'the wrong way'. We need to stop protesting against the election of Trump, or the vote for Brexit, and start thinking long and hard about how, without surrendering our core commitments, we're going to address the economic and social concerns of the millions who vote with Trump, Le Pen, Johnson, and Farage.