

Despair Fatigue

How hopelessness grew boring

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Is it possible to become bored with hopelessness?

There is reason to believe something like that is beginning to happen in Great Britain. Call it despair fatigue.

For nearly half a century, British culture, particularly on the left, has made an art out of despair. This is the land where “No Future for You” became the motto of a generation, and then another generation, and then another. From the crumbling of its empire, to the crumbling of its industrial cities, to the current crumbling of its welfare state, the country seemed to be exploring every possible permutation of despair: despair as rage, despair as resignation, despair as humor, despair as pride or secret pleasure. It’s almost as if it’s finally run out.

On the surface, and from a distance, Britain looks like it’s experiencing one of the stranger paroxysms of masochistic self-destruction in world history. Since the Conservative victory of 2010, first in coalition with the Liberal Democrats and now on its own, the British government has set out to systematically unravel much of what makes life good and decent in the country. Conservative leaders started by trashing the United Kingdom’s once proud university system, while eyeing the greatest source of national pride and dignity, the universal health guarantees of the National Health Service. All of this is being done in the name of an economic doctrine—*austerity*, the imperative need for fiscal discipline—that no one genuinely believes in and whose results pretty much everyone deplors (including prime minister David Cameron, who in private has denounced the decline of his local public services), in response to an existential crisis that does not exist.

How did this happen? It appears that the entire political class has become trapped in the bizarrely successful narrative that swept the Tories into power after the crash of 2008 and still sustains them long after its consequences have run beyond any sort of humanity or common sense.

Boom Crash Opera

Pretty much every major sitting government was booted out after the crash, and the political complexion of the government in question largely determined the popular narrative of what had caused the crash to begin with. In the United States, it was George W. Bush’s fault, so the popular onus fell on the CEOs and hedge fund managers who Bush used to refer to, at fundraisers, as his “base.” None were actually prosecuted, but most Americans felt strongly that they ought to be. In the United Kingdom, where Gordon Brown’s Labour Party was sitting in Downing Street, everyone accepted the opposition’s narrative that the British crash resulted from irresponsible social spending and government deficits. In fact, the Tories found that appealing to a rhetoric of shared sacrifice, belt-tightening, and even collective suffering struck a chord in the British public. This was perhaps most true of working-class voters. Now almost entirely stripped of any sense of community, neighborhood, or workplace solidarity by decades of right-wing social engineering, they saw the hard times and rationing of World War II as the last time Britons had acted with a genuine common purpose.

The social effects of the spending cuts—all ostensibly aimed at reducing the supposedly catastrophic government debt overhang—have been devastating. British universities, which not so many years ago were (as in most of Europe) entirely free, have become among the most expensive in the world. Social housing has been ransacked, subsidies have been cut, and squatting

in residential properties was made illegal at exactly the moment tens of thousands were being “decanted” from their homes. To be poor now means to be endlessly assessed, monitored, and surveyed, and almost invariably found wanting. No one really knows how many thousands of people have died as a result of the freefall in government support, but to get just an inkling: between December 2011 and February 2014, the Department of Work and Pensions reported that 2,380 Britons previously on disability support were found dead no more than six weeks after receiving notice that they were having their benefits cut because they had been determined to be “fit for work.”

One reason this could happen is that there’s been virtually no public debate on austerity itself. At no point, for example, did a major TV news outlet host a panel of economists discussing whether public debt was really the cause of the economic crisis, or debating whether European-style austerity or Obama-style fiscal stimulus would be a more appropriate response. The only questions were how much budget cutting was required and where the cuts should fall. This confident Tory narrative reigned unchallenged from the rudest hack in the *Daily Mail* to the most chiseled eminence of the (supposedly socialist) BBC, and all figures of public authority held to it even after the immediate effects of the cuts proved spectacularly ineffective. Even as double dip turned to triple dip and Tory chancellor George Osborne doubled down by making increasingly bizarre pledges (that all future governments would run a surplus, that Britain would completely eliminate its national debt, etc.), scarcely any major pundit, editorialist, or TV commentator broke ranks. And when, after years of abject misery, the economy, inevitably, began to stir a tiny bit, all instantly proclaimed that Osborne was vindicated.

This consensus, oddly, has next to nothing to do with the opinions of professional economists. Almost all British economists understood that the gaping deficits of 2008 and 2009 had been caused by the banking crisis, not the other way around. Likewise, anyone paying attention knew that cutbacks of public services to “save money” reduced economic activity, and hence government tax revenues, and so really had the effect of raising, not lowering deficits. Most also understood that deficits weren’t really much of a problem to begin with. But even the opinion of mainstream economists was, suddenly, excluded from public debate. By 2012, even the IMF was issuing statements urging the Tories to lay off. But you’d never learn any of this from the *Times*, the *Observer*, or the BBC.

How could such total, lock-step defiance of reality be maintained in a country with a formally free press and highly educated population? To some degree, you find the familiar bubble effect. Politicians, journalists, lobbyists, CEOs, and corporate bureaucrats rarely talk to anyone except each other. They constitute a distinct intellectual universe. Within this universe, economic policies are designed primarily for political marketability; economic science exists largely to provide impressive diagrams and equations to sell them with. Phrases designed in think tanks and focus groups (“free markets,” “wealth creators,” “personal responsibility,” “shared sacrifice”) are repeated like incantations until it all seems like such unthinking common sense that no one even asks what the resulting picture has to do with social reality. True, the bubble logic can be maintained only by a certain studied ignorance of how the economy really works. One 2014 poll discovered, for instance, that 90 percent of sitting MPs, for all their endless debates on the need to save money, didn’t know where money comes from. (They thought it was created by the Royal Mint.)

The bubble effect is not unique to Britain, of course. Political debate in the United States, Japan, or Germany works much the same way. But in Britain, things have gone so far that we

are beginning to see a classic Big Lie reinforcer effect. When the consensus reality gets this completely divorced from actually existing reality, when so many innocent people have suffered as a result, and when anyone pointing this out has been so consistently and aggressively denounced as a tinfoil-hat-wearing flat-earther or Trotskyite, to break ranks would mean admitting that the lunatics were right. There is nothing the established media is more loath to do.

The divorce between consensus and reality has grown so extreme and unworkable that even the technocrats charged with running the system have started to cry foul. In 2014 the Bank of England—its economists apparently exhausted by having to carry out economic policy in a made-up, topsy-turvy world designed only to benefit the rich—issued a statement on “Money Creation in the Modern Economy” that effectively destroyed the entire theoretical basis for austerity. Money, they noted, is not created by governments, or even central bankers, who must be careful not to make too much of it lest they spark inflation; it’s actually created by private banks making loans. Without debt there would be no money. The post-Keynesian heterodox economists, regularly denounced as a lunatic fringe by those commentators willing to acknowledge their existence, were right.

No major news outlet considered this a story; politicians continued preaching their morality tales of the evils of debt exactly as they had before.

Nothing but Class

So what is the real basis of the British economy? It is, after all, the fifth largest in the world.

It’s important to remember that, despite much rhetoric to the contrary, the economy of the United Kingdom, like those of other wealthy countries, is largely self-sustaining. There are still farms, factories, mines, fisheries, and artisanal workshops, and these continue to meet most of the country’s material needs. Much of the feeling that Britain has deindustrialized is due to the decline of the giant factories of mid-century. But these were always something of an anomaly: from the heyday of the Industrial Revolution to the Victorian era, when Britain led the world in production and technological innovation, the economy was dominated by a combination of high finance and small family firms—much as it is today.

Still, in many ways Britain resembles an imperial economy: while it does export machinery, pharmaceuticals, plastics, petrol, and a whole variety of high-quality artisanal products, in sheer material terms it takes in far, far more than it sends out. So we must ask a simple question: Why do other countries continue to send their things to Britain? How is it that the island manages to take in so much more from the rest of the world than it gives them in return?

The conventional answer is, of course, “financial services.” The economy of the United Kingdom now turns around its financial hub, the City of London, whose largest firms play an enormous role in coordinating international trade. The City’s advantages are partly just those of Greenwich Mean Time: a billionaire in Qatar or Mumbai can make a call to his broker in London with only a few hours difference; in New York, let alone California, it’s likely to be the middle of the night. What’s more, the same billionaire can speak to a broker with a familiar, reassuring Oxbridge accent, giving him the pleasant feeling of now having the grandson of his country’s former colonial officials at his beck and call.

Surely there is something in this. But it cannot be the whole explanation. The scale is just too large. Do people in Brazil or Korea really send endless container ships full of steel, cars,

or computers to Britain because they are charmed by Oxbridge accents or awed by its skill at paperwork? Because paperwork, after all, is all that “financial services” ultimately is, and there are plenty of people in Brazil and Korea who are extremely good at paperwork as well.

Another argument, common in leftist circles, is that Britain is simply reaping the benefits of its position as loyal lieutenant of the American empire. The U.S.-sponsored “financial system” is, as economists like Michael Hudson have argued, largely a shakedown system, a means of extracting something if not identical to, then very like imperial tribute from the rest of the world. Britain, so understood, could then be seen as facilitating the process within its own former imperial territories, perhaps with a covert eye to flipping its allegiances to China and India when their time comes. No doubt there is something to this too, but again, it’s hardly a complete explanation. In the United Kingdom, “finance” is based above all in real estate, and the real estate bubble that sustains the City is itself sustained by the fact that pretty much every billionaire in the world feels they have to maintain at least a flat, and more often a townhouse, in a fashionable part of London. Why? There are plenty of other well-appointed modern cities in the world, most of which have a decidedly more appealing climate. Yet even more than, say, New York or San Francisco, London real estate has become something like U.S. treasury bonds, a basic currency of the international rich.

It’s when one asks questions like these that economics and politics become indistinguishable. Those who have investigated the situation find that London’s appeal—and by extension, Britain’s—rests on two factors. First of all, Russian oligarchs or Saudi princesses know they can get pretty much anything they want in London, from antique candelabras and high-tech spy devices, to Mary Poppins-style nannies for their children, fresh lobsters delivered by bicycle in the wee hours, and every conceivable variety of exotic sexual service, music, and food. What’s more, the boodles will be delivered by a cheerful, creative, and subservient working-class population who, drawing on centuries of tradition, know exactly how to be butlers. The second factor is security. If one is a nouveau riche construction magnate or diamond trader from Hong Kong, Delhi, or Bahrain, one is keenly aware that at home, something could still go terribly wrong: revolution, a sudden U-turn of government policy, expropriation, violent unrest. None of this could possibly happen in Notting Hill or Chelsea. Any political change that would significantly affect the most wealthy was effectively taken off the table with the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

In other words, the historical defeat and humiliation of the British working classes is now the island’s primary export product. By organizing the entire economy around the resultant housing bubble, the Tories have ensured that the bulk of the British population is aware, at least on some tacit level, that it is precisely the global appeal of the English class system, up to and including the contemptuous sneer of the Oxbridge graduates in Parliament chuckling over the impending removal of housing benefits, that is also keeping affordable track shoes, beer, and consumer electronics flowing into the country. It’s an impossible dilemma. It’s hardly surprising, then, that so many turn to cynical right-wing populists like UKIP, who manipulate the resulting indignation by fomenting rage against Polish construction workers instead of Russian oligarchs, Bangladeshi drivers instead of Qatari princes, and West Indian porters instead of Brazilian steel tycoons.

This marketing of class subservience is the essence of Tory economic strategy. Industry may be trounced and the university system turned (back) into a playground for the rich, but even if this leads to a collapse of technology and the knowledge economy, the end result will only seal in

more firmly the class system that produces Tory politicians: England will literally have nothing else to sell.

Tony Blair's New Labour policies, which, despite the Labour Party's working-class funding base, basically represented the sensibilities of the professional classes, did attempt to forge an alternative vision. For the Blairites, the United Kingdom's future lay in what they called the "creative industries." Had not the United Kingdom, regularly since the sixties, produced waves of popular music and youth culture that had swept the world, bringing in billions in direct and indirect revenue? It must have seemed a plausible gambit in the nineties, but it failed because the Blairites were operating with a completely false understanding of where cultural creativity comes from.

They naively assumed creativity was basically a middle-class phenomenon, the product of people like themselves. In fact, almost everything worthwhile that has come out of British culture for the last century, from music hall, to street kebabs, to standup comedy, rock 'n' roll, and the rave scene, has been primarily a working-class phenomenon. Essentially, these were the things the working class created when they weren't actually working. The sprouting of British popular culture in the sixties was entirely a product of the United Kingdom's then very generous welfare state. There is a reason that in Cockney rhyming slang, the word for "dole" is "rock 'n' roll" ("he got the sack, he's on the rock 'n' roll again"): a surprising proportion of major bands later to sweep the world spent at least some of their formative years on unemployment relief. Blairites were stupid enough to combine their promotion of "Cool Britannia" with massive welfare reforms, which effectively guaranteed the entire project would crash and burn, since they ensured that pretty much everyone with the potential to become the next John Lennon would instead spend the rest of their lives stacking boxes in their local Tesco as part of the new welfare conditionality.

In the end, all that the Blairites managed to produce was a world-class marketing sector (since that's what middle-class people are actually good at); otherwise, they had nothing to show for themselves at all.

The Return of the Future

All this might seem irredeemably bleak. All the more surprising, then, that the main reaction on the left, beginning tentatively with the 2010 student movement and now exploding everywhere, has been a wave of almost insolent optimism and a (admittedly hesitant) return to utopian visions. This is why I started by speaking of "despair fatigue." There is a still small but growing realization that if Great Britain is going to enter history again—if there is going to be any sort of grand, positive vision for its future—that vision can come only from the left.

When all is said and done, the Tory and New Labour visions aren't really visions at all. True, in Thatcher's time, and even to some degree in Tony Blair's, the market reformers managed to pass themselves off as in some sense the real revolutionaries. But no one makes such a claim anymore. The same lip service is paid to the idea that market enthusiasts are young, enthusiastic, and tech-savvy, and that those who defend the remains of the welfare state are a pack of bitter old geezers whining at the pub. This pretense is becoming increasingly hollow too. Having achieved their consensus reality, the only thing the political classes have left to do is defend it. Everyone knows the Conservatives hold sway precisely because they have convinced the public

they actually *are* conservatives; their fabled “competence” really comes down to the argument that only they can manage to hold things together, roughly as they currently exist, before the advent of some inevitable catastrophe whose precise contours we cannot know.

Meanwhile, on the streets and council estates, Britain is undergoing a sea change, a veritable efflorescence of resistance. It’s very hard to know the real scale of it because, unlike in generations past, the media largely refuses to report on it. Perhaps this is because when they do, the results are rarely what they expect. On May 9, 2015, the day after the Tory election victory was declared, before the inevitable new round of cuts could even be announced, there was a minor riot in front of the prime minister’s offices at 10 Downing Street. Hundreds of student activists clashed with police; several of them, on being punched and kicked by uniformed officers, actually punched back; paint bombs were thrown, flares set off, and the Women of World War II memorial was daubed with the familiar slogan “Fuck Tory Scum.” The editors of the right-wing tabloid the *Daily Mail* decided that the public mood was such that it might even be possible to actually report this, and ran a huge spread with splashy pictures under the headline “Anarchist Mob Planning Summer of Thuggery.” Within twenty-four hours, they were horrified to discover that in the comments section, opinion among their own readers was running something like five to one in favor of anarchist thuggery. Even the “desecration” of the memorial didn’t raise much in the way of hackles. After all, most Britons are well aware that the first thing veterans did, on returning from the war, was oust Churchill’s sitting Tory government and vote in one that promised to preside over the creation of a modern welfare state. This is precisely the work the current inhabitants of Downing Street are trying to dismantle. The rioters were simply defending those veterans’ legacy and enunciating what they, if alive, would most likely be saying themselves.

Between student occupations, housing occupations, street actions, and a revival of radical unionism, there has been an unprecedented upswell of resistance. But even more important, it has begun, however haltingly, to take on a very different spirit than the desperate, rear-guard actions of years past. After all, even the legendary poll-tax riots that dislodged Thatcher were either backward-looking or, alternately, bitter and nihilistic. Class War’s slogans (“The Royal Question: Hanging or Shooting?”) were perhaps charmingly provocative, but hardly utopian.

This is where the notion of despair fatigue comes in.

One might argue that its beginnings were already visible in popular culture. Witness the emergence of the Scottish socialist school of science fiction, which, after the relentless dystopianism of the seventies, eighties, and nineties, led the way to a broader trend by toying with redemptive futures once again. Then there was Steampunk, surely the most peculiar of countercultural trends, a kind of ungainly Victorian futurism full of steam-powered computers and airships, top-hatted cyborgs, floating cities powered by Tesla coils, and an endless variety of technologies that had never actually emerged. I remember attending some academic conference on the subject and asking myself, “Okay, I get the steam part, that’s obvious, but ... what exactly does this have to do with punk?” And then it dawned on me. No Future! The Victorian era was the last time when most people in this country genuinely believed in a technologically-driven future that was going to lead to a world not only more prosperous and equal, but actually more fun and exciting than their own. Then, of course, came the Great War, and we discovered what the twentieth century was really going to be like, with its monotonous alternation of terror and boredom in the trenches. Was not Steampunk a way of saying, can’t we just go back, write off the entire last century as a bad dream, and start over?

And is this not a necessary moment of reset before trying to imagine what a genuinely revolutionary twenty-first century might actually be like?

On to Corbofuturism

The first stirrings came, appropriately enough, from Scotland, where in 2015 the Scottish National Party made a virtually clean sweep of Parliamentary seats, running an explicitly socialist, anti-austerity platform and trouncing a tepid Labour Party unwilling to fundamentally challenge the Conservative agenda. (Basically no one in Scotland votes Tory.) But the real earthquake came a few months later, with the apparently inexplicable rise of Jeremy Corbyn and his shadow chancellor John McDonnell to the head of the Labour Party in Westminster itself. In the eyes of the media, which—even ostensibly left venues like the *Guardian*—is absolutely and unconditionally hostile to the new Labour team, their success is itself a product of political despair: those whining old geezers in the pub have given up on even trying to win elections and have spat in the face of the entire system by electing one of their own. And it's true; the new Labour leadership is made up of genuine radicals. Corbyn and McDonnell represent the activist wing of the Labour Party—until recently, a very small faction indeed, consisting of, at best, half a dozen MPs. They have been regular supporters and even participants in the popular mobilizations.

I am not just talking about speaking at rallies here. I can myself testify to this. When, in the summer of 2014, activists from Disabled People Against Cuts were chaining themselves to the “sanctuary lawn” at Westminster Abbey in a vain attempt to focus media attention on the closure of the Independent Living Fund that promised to leave even more people with disabilities dead, McDonnell and I were part of the crew carrying spare batteries for their wheelchairs. Both he and Corbyn openly support a philosophy that insists that social change can never come from electoral politics alone, but only from a combination of political mobilization, union organizing, and as McDonnell once charmingly put it, “what in the old days we used to call ‘insurrection,’ though nowadays we politely call it ‘direct action.’” One can only imagine the horror that ensued among the political establishment when such people were suddenly catapulted to positions of leadership within one of the country's two major parties. From their point of view, it's not as if Bernie Sanders had taken over the Democratic Party. It's more as if it had been annexed by a combination of Noam Chomsky and Abbie Hoffman.

How did it happen? In the immediate sense, Corbyn's rise was precisely a product of the weird conceptual bubble in which the British political class operates. The Blairite hacks who dominate the Labour Party were keen to break any remaining power of the unions, and were so convinced that their manufactured common sense really *was* common to everyone that they decided the best way to do this was to change the rules and allow the party leader to be elected by popular vote. It never seems to have occurred to them that a significant percentage of members of a still ostensibly leftist political party might actually respond positively to leftist values. In the wake of the Tory victory, McDonnell, at least so the story goes, convinced a sufficient number of Blairite MPs to support a hard-left candidate for head of the party to “broaden the debate,” which was balanced on the other side by their own hard-right pro-business candidate, Liz Kendall—a favorite of England's notoriously clueless pundits. Then those same delegates stared, slack-jawed, as Corbyn heaped in 59.5 percent of the ballot in a field of four, the biggest landslide ever won by any candidate for Labour leadership. (Kendall pulled in last with 4.5 percent.)

On one level, the pundits were probably right: Corbynmania was just a way of giving the finger to the establishment. The man's appeal rests largely on a complete absence of conventional charisma. He has no rhetorical flair whatsoever. He simply tells you what he thinks. In a political field so corrupt that it often seems the moral spectrum for public figures runs roughly from calculating cynic to actual child molester, the idea that a genuinely honest man could successfully run for public office was a kind of revelation. Corbyn is rooted in the socialist tradition, but lacks any specific ideology or agenda. To vote for him was simply to vote for a set of values. Those who supported him knew that it was only after the election that the real work would begin, of figuring out how (or indeed, whether) it was possible for politicians and street activists to synergize their efforts without co-opting or destroying one another, what sort of economic model the left can counterpose to the Tories' marketing of class subservience, and what a "new politics" based on popular participation in decision-making might actually be like. It's still all very much up for grabs, and the whole project might well shipwreck terribly, leaving the left utterly defeated for many years to come. Certainly, the entire media and party establishment have made it clear that they are willing to do almost anything to reverse the results of the leadership election. But three things give reason for hope.

First, if a general realignment of British politics really were going on, this is probably what it would look like. The role of the Bank of England is crucial here. It has always seen itself as something of a bellwether. In the mid- to late seventies, the Bank of England's sudden and unexpected embrace of monetarist economic models paved the way for the Thatcherite revolution to follow; and Thatcher, it must be remembered, was considered as much an outrageous insurgent within her own party at the time as Corbyn is considered now. So it's possible that an uncanny parallel is working itself out.

Second, the new Labour leadership does have a fairly clear route to power. The United Kingdom's current economy is based on an artificially maintained housing bubble, and bubbles do invariably burst. Labour has four years before the next election. The chance of there not being some kind of economic crisis in those four years is infinitesimal. For the Corbynites, the task is twofold: first, to create a narrative about the dangers of private debt in the same way the Tories did about public debt, so that the Conservatives will be firmly saddled with the blame (all the easier, perhaps—or perhaps not—because this narrative will actually be true); and second, and more difficult, to remain as the Labour leadership, resisting any internal Blairite coup, until the inevitable crash takes place.

Finally, the very fact that Corbyn is something of a tabula rasa has inspired an onrush of contesting visions, an eager concatenation of new economic and political models vying for attention, which has begun to reveal just how rich and diverse possible left-wing visions of the future might actually be. It's not just the predictable arrival of the economic luminaries to hold court with the new shadow chancellor—everyone from Joseph Stiglitz and Ann Pettifor, to Yanis Varoufakis and Thomas Piketty. Genuinely radical ideas are being debated and proposed. Should the left be pursuing accelerationism, pushing the contradictions of capitalism forward with rapid growth and development, or should it aim toward a total shift of values and radical de-growth? Or should we be moving toward what Novara, the media initiative that emerged from the 2010 student movement, began cheerfully referring to as FALC—or Fully Automated Luxury Communism—encouraging technologies like 3-D printing to aim for a world of Star Trek-style replicators where everything is free? Should the central bank enact "quantitative easing for the

people,” or a universal citizen’s income policy, or should we go the way of Modern Money Theory and universal jobs guarantees?

All this is being carried on in the knowledge that existing economic paradigms—even insofar as they are not simply being mobilized to justify policies designed for purely political purposes—are no longer relevant to the problems humanity is actually facing, in Britain or anywhere else. True, most mainstream economists are capable of seeing through obvious nonsense, like the justifications proposed for fiscal austerity. But the discipline is still trying to solve what is essentially a nineteenth-century problem: how to allocate scarce resources in such a way as to optimize productivity to meet rising consumer demand.

Twenty-first century problems are likely to be entirely different: How, in a world of potentially skyrocketing productivity and decreasing demand for labor, will it be possible to maintain equitable distribution without at the same time destroying the earth? Might the United Kingdom become a pioneer for such a new economic dispensation? The new Labour leadership is making the initial moves: calling for new economic models (“socialism with an iPad”) and seeking potential allies in high-tech industry. If we really are moving toward a future of decentralized, small, high-tech, robotized production, it’s quite possible that the United Kingdom’s peculiar traditions of small-scale enterprise and amateur science—which never made it particularly amenable to the giant bureaucratized conglomerates that did so well in the United States and Germany, in either their capitalist or socialist manifestations—might prove unusually apt. It’s all a colossal gamble. But then, that’s what historical change is like.

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