

The Uses of Catastrophism

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The long sleep

Let's be honest with ourselves. We face today a broad range of truly monumental problems. It is clear that we remain grossly unprepared for many of the challenges that lie in front of us. Rather than acknowledging their huge scale and interconnectedness, and the hard work and sacrifice needed to overcome them, we tend to display a collective form of what psychoanalysts call 'fetishistic disavowal'. We know what we would prefer not to know, and so we continue on as if we were, in fact, not in possession of this disturbing knowledge. This knowledge strikes us as too difficult to deal with, too threatening to be faced head on, and so it is disavowed and forced from consciousness. Having convinced ourselves that we do not know of the problems that lie before us, or that we lack the capacity to do anything about them, we are granted leave to blithely stumble onwards with our own lives, absorbed in our own struggles and idiosyncratic preoccupations. We carry only the vague hope that others will act on our behalf, or that some mystical force might intervene to ensure that everything continues to rumble on in the normal manner. Despite the cacophony of criticism levelled at governments and elites, we appear still to have a general faith that those in power have the skills and information needed to guide us onto the best path forward. Given time, we hope, our political elites will see sense, shake off their lethargy and formulate a plan to prevent the various catastrophes that appear to await us in the near future. Let me be absolutely clear about this: They will not. At least, not without being forced to do so.

Let me begin this brief contribution with a preliminary and rather basic observation: if our goal is to *rejuvenate the social* – to make it real and vibrant to the extent that people are compelled to abandon solipsistic individualism and fight their way free from the prevailing culture of depressive cynicism before once again investing in collective projects, goals and identities – then there must be a corresponding *rejuvenation of the political*. The supremacy of neoliberal political

economy in the west, tied as it is to a doctrine of asocial liberalism and the stupid pleasures of 24-hour hyper-consumerism, has depoliticised our cultures and fragmented and individualised our society. It makes no sense to argue otherwise.

There are one or two signs of life at the margins, but millions across the country now recognise that our political system is banal, stage-managed and profoundly alienating. On the surface, our political system seems dedicated to openness, fairness and inclusivity, but huge swathes of the population feel entirely cut adrift from those that purport to represent them, and those who claim to govern in the best interests of all. The very things that our parliamentarians agree upon and take for granted are the very things that a properly political culture would debate and discuss. Alternatives to the present orthodoxy, especially with regard to political economy, are noticeable only by their absence. The effects of this longstanding political inertia are legion.

We tend to assume that it is the presence of objects, forces or ideas that produce negative social consequences. However, absence, or lack, can also be causative. When things could and perhaps should be present, but remain absent, there is an effect. The failure of our culture and our politics to produce inspiring, understandable and appealing alternatives to the present produces effects that can be seen around us all of the time. We continue to live in the shadow of a stalled dialectic. We cannot move forward with purpose because we cannot imagine appealing alternatives to liberal capitalism and parliamentary democracy. Even now, with the first signs of epochal crisis coming into view, we cannot countenance the prospect of deep structural intervention. We refuse to consider the curtailment of consumer lifestyles. We cannot disconnect ourselves from the lures and enticements of consumer society and e. Every attempt to improve things at a fundamental level will, we are told, prove to be an utter disaster for all of us.

The commonly identified positive features of consumer capitalism outweigh its increasingly stark negativities. Our investment in the system is so long-running, so complete, that we cling to its structures, codes, promises and rhythms, despite that fact that knowledge of capitalism's dark side is widely dispersed throughout our culture. We cling to the hope that the system can be

rehabilitated, that it can be made moral by the compassion of those people who work within its structures, that the will of the people will be acted upon and that the avarice of profit motive will soon be forced into a cage of social democratic regulation.

The lengths we go to avoid doing what we know is necessary gives us some indication of just how successful the ruling ideology has been in its drive to integrate all into its project of endless renewal and continuity. Surely, with a little adjustment here and there, we can continue to move incrementally toward the civilizational ideal? Surely, given time, the government will listen to reason and begin to utilise serious social scientific evidence in the formulation of social policy? Surely it remains possible for us to harness the raw power of the market and use it in the best interests of all? Tragedy, we are told, accompanies fundamental change. Any attempt to make things better will make things worse. Isn't it true that all alternatives to parliamentary capitalism are repressive, inhumane and totalitarian? Shouldn't we just move forward in a progressive direction using incremental adjustments to policy? Won't the simple strategy of accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative take us in the right direction?

I am often told that my desire to see fundamental social change is idealistic. I am told to be pragmatic and focus upon achievable goals. This strikes me as quite odd, given the scale of the problems we face. Isn't it idealistic to believe that what exists can be rehabilitated? Isn't it idealistic to believe that our leaders will soon guide us away from the precipice? Isn't it idealistic to imagine that myriad technological fixes will magically emerge from the corporate sector to head off the worst effects of climate change? What we need now is a cold realism, a realism that acknowledges the absolute necessity of jumping into the driver's seat and attempting to steer the juggernaut in another direction (see Hall and Winlow, 2015). The fundamental realist question today is this: what kinds of intervention can be made and just how deep do these interventions need to go in order to significantly alter what appears to be our destiny?

The failure of academia and politics to equip people with a positive vision means that we leave the door open for the politics of negativity and hate to wander in and make themselves at home.

Fear and anxiety are everywhere these days. But the absence from the political imagination of positive alternatives to our present way of life also feeds into the cynicism and depressive hedonia – a ‘hedonism’ infused with sadness and dissatisfaction rather than joy – that are such important features of life in the real world, away from the glittering metropolis, away from the university campus, away from the corporate office, beyond the corridors and meeting rooms of Westminster. When we believe that no one really cares, that nothing much can be done, and that nothing will ever change, we tend to beat an understandable retreat toward hedonism and gratification. However, such activities fail to yield any genuine sense of satisfaction or joy. Rather, there is a palpable sense of lack, of absence, a perennial sense that something is missing (Winlow and Hall, 2013).

Part of this is to do with the fact that consumer culture now issues an injunction to enjoy. We are instructed to chase after hedonistic experiences, to indulge beyond reason, to never miss an opportunity to revel in excess, to transgress every boundary placed in front of us. The problem is that the pleasures of transgression are no longer experienced as they were in the past. It is difficult to enjoy that which we are instructed to enjoy. This absence, this sense of cynicism, irony and depression tied to insubstantial consumer indulgences, can be seen throughout our culture by anyone who has a mind to look. If we are to identify the fundamental causes of these feelings of atomisation and dissatisfaction we must dig beneath empirical reality and talk honestly and openly about the powerful forces and stark processes we find there (see Hall and Winlow, 2015). Our political systems appear unable to produce appealing and comprehensible alternatives to our present way of life and this is having a corrosive effect upon both our culture and our society.

There is a tendency among many liberal social scientists to deny all of this. Many appear to find comfort in optimism and dismiss such critique as overly generalised and reductive. They want to discuss those minority groups whose lives remain animated by politics and those who can still utilise a functional symbolic order. They want to direct our attention to the young who, they believe, are the bearers of a gleaming banner that will in the near future replace darkness with light. However, the compulsory optimism of liberal social science actively prevents us from taking

the steps that must be taken if we are to do what needs to be done. The compulsion to continually strive to identify difference has had a paralysing effect upon the social sciences. It has led to the continual postponement of conclusions, and an absolute refusal to acknowledge those things that bond us all together, those things to which we are all subject, and those things that are shared by all. Our culture has also been subject to a corresponding process that has sought to denigrate and lampoon intellectualism. We have seen the rise of a deeply regrettable base populism that is closely tied to ongoing processes of marketization and commodification.

To drag the social free from its moorings in political economy is a profound mistake, and it is a mistake made with alarming regularity by social scientists today. Given the scale of our problems, we must now be honest enough to recognise that the social cannot and will not be rejuvenated, reconfigured or made ethical by some nebulous movement of the spirit, or by the sudden and magical appearance of a new cultural imperative to abandon selfishness and intolerance and adopt an open and altruistic attitude to others (see Winlow et al, 2015, 2016). To do what needs to be done to set us on a better course, we must move beyond the sphere of culture. There can be no quick and easy fix. We cannot simply shame, encourage or cajole the people into setting aside their differences. We cannot simply instruct the people to be a little nicer to each other and hope against hope that our edicts are acted upon. There is no slight adjustment we can make, and no simple story we can spin, that will get us back on the track. If we truly hope to rejuvenate the social, rather than simply cover up its continued disintegration with shallow, presentational displays of charitable fellow-feeling, we must recognise that the roots of the problems we face today go much deeper. If social scientists remain dedicated to the pursuit of truth, then they must start digging down through the various sedimentary layers of reality until they can locate and accurately identify fundamental causes.

Facing up to reality

We should start by facing up to this stark fact: social life today cannot return to full bloom if in our economic life we remain fetishistically attached to a market logic that actively cultivates

social competition, anxiety and envy, and reallocates money and resources from mainstream civil society upwards towards a plutocratic elite that has already amassed a staggering proportion of global wealth (see Piketty, 2014). We cannot recreate the social if the economic platform upon which we must build it forces us all to pursue our own interests at the expense of almost everything else. If we clear away all the ideology and all of the detailed analysis of capitalism and its history, we find at its core a fundamental exchange relation that compels economic actors to attempt to take from the other more than they are willing to give in return. This basic logic has shaped the west's cultural life for hundreds of years, but, because the defence mechanisms erected during the post-war social democratic settlement have been abandoned, we sense, in a general and imprecise manner, its growing power and proximity. We recognise the growth of individualism and the decline of collectivism, and, if we are honest with ourselves, we can see the decline of community life and the growing prevalence of narcissism, envy and anxiety in our cultures. Indeed, the culture industries have for decades attempted to convince the masses that these processes are positive, and that we should celebrate and revel in the opportunities and freedoms that have arisen as the old 'repressive' social order has splintered and decayed. Altruism survives, of course, but its continued existence does little to challenge the dominant ideology. The continued existence of charitable impulses should not be taken as evidence that the people remain essentially good, kind and sympathetic, or that capitalism's attempt to occupy and control our cultural life is forever destined to fail. Rather, charity these days acts to cushion the hammer blows of economic restructuring, and it allows the titans of the free market the opportunity to assuage their guilt while encouraging 'economic development' and the expansion and evolution of markets. Charity is increasingly tied to the logic of the market; it is in no way antagonistic to it. One of the key distinctions between the liberal left and the radical left is relevant here: do we want to live in a society in which there is more charity and in which more care is shown towards the poorest, or do we want to live in a society in which charity isn't necessary and in which poverty as we know it today has been eliminated?

We must be honest enough to acknowledge that the degeneration of the social is connected to the total dominance of global capitalism and its ideological support systems, and the absence of

any conceivable alternative to what already exists. The changing characteristics of markets, and the gradual evolution of social and political attitudes towards the profit motive, inevitably inform our culture and the general character of our shared social life.

It is a profound mistake to believe that we can reconstruct a vibrant and nourishing social life without controlling or replacing the raw asocial imperatives that lie at the core of our economy. We are now living through a period of quite profound social and political turmoil, and much of this turmoil stems from the total domination of markets over people and the attachment of our elites to the neoliberal economic model, which has been stripped of its ideological character and repackaged as pure economic pragmatism. There once existed the political will to regulate and constrain the profit motive, and to use its herculean power to secure social goods that benefitted all. As the social democratic consensus gave way to the current neoliberal consensus, the common good was abandoned as a fundamental political concern. In fact, over time, such ideals were mocked and pilloried to such an extent that even politicians on the mainstream left found it necessary to utilise the language of the market to construct a positive image of the future. These political and economic changes impacted on society and culture in ways we are only now beginning to get to grips with. The collective identities of the modern age were broken apart and splintered into a dazzling array of subject positions. Thatcher famously claimed that society did not exist. Her political successes and the longevity of the consensus she helped to establish made this antisocial libertarian proclamation a reality.

Now is the time to push past the dead ideas that clutter the field of the contemporary social sciences and think anew about what the continued supremacy of markets will mean for our shared life together. We need new ideas now more than ever, and we should not be afraid to offer a measured dose of economic determinism when it is appropriate to do so. Only when we recognise and begin to come to terms with the interconnectedness of politics, society and economy can we construct reasonable accounts of the mess we're in and how we might begin the process of extracting ourselves from it.

The problems that exist today cannot be fixed with carefully calibrated policy interventions. I am often told by colleagues on the left that activist movements can win significant concessions from government, and that the accumulation of a broad range of small and pragmatic reforms can set our society back on a more equitable footing. There is a small measure of truth in this. Small victories can be achieved. However, the overall trend is quite clear. Activist movements may win small skirmishes here and there, but these minor victories are as nothing when underneath our feet a grinding tectonic realignment is separating us from the very things that make civil society possible. Piecemeal adjustments here and there simply will not do. Things are trending downwards. Our economies look set to experience a prolonged period of low or no growth, and, of course, further crashes remain highly likely. There is a shocking lack of reasonably remunerated productive jobs for young people right across the deindustrialised countries of the west, and there is little sign that our politicians are willing to act to realign global trade flows. We are already seeing the first signs of resource wars, and an unseemly corporate scramble to secure mineral wealth is well underway. Energy and food and water security are now of significant concern to western governments, and climate change and geopolitical turmoil are driving millions away from their countries of origin and towards what seems like the wealth and tranquillity of developed western states. The influx of migrants to the Eurozone has already fuelled nationalist politics across the continent, and this trend looks set to continue. Problems of this magnitude cannot be fixed by carefully calibrated policy interventions. The roots of these problems are buried deep, and messing around with surface changes will be of little use to us.

Our national economies are now so intertwined that, even if a radical leftist party were to win office, it would be difficult for a national government to genuinely transform things. We need new forms of intervention that challenge and move beyond the powerfully restrictive framework of global political economy. I am told repeatedly by my colleagues on the left that small interventions add up, and that small adjustments are better than no adjustments at all. However, I remain convinced that we must look towards the bigger picture if we are to avoid the gradual degeneration of those things we value about the present. As I see it, the key question for sociologists now is not, what practical measures can we take that will improve things slightly for

those who suffer most? Rather it is, how can we intervene, and just how deep do we need to go, in order to create a sustainable social world that values and includes every citizen? Of course, to answer this question we need to free ourselves from the constraints of empiricism and once again grant ourselves license to interpret and imagine. We must also free ourselves from the dead ideas of the twentieth century and construct our own intellectual frameworks that are capable of coming to terms with the world as it is now.

Left-leaning sociologists often believe that ‘speaking truth to power’ has the capacity to transform our social and political future. They believe that if they can prove a policy doesn’t work, or that the policy is in fact counterproductive, power will be forced to change tack. Sociologists will then have used their expertise to correct an injustice or overcome an impediment to human flourishing. However, it is now high time to think again about concentrated power and its willingness to engage in democratic negotiation. Perhaps the injunction to ‘speak truth to power’ always sent the committed sociologist on a fool’s errand. The fact is, power already knows the truth. After many years of engaged social research, it is perfectly clear to me that injustice is not an aberration. It is not a sign that the system is failing to function adequately. Injustice is an unavoidable outcome of our global political economy. These injustices are not signs of some kind of blockage in the system that needs to be addressed and removed; rather, they are concrete indicators of the logic of the system itself. Contemporary global capitalism continues in its present form by gradually withdrawing from modernism’s various social commitments. Injustices continue to stack up on top of each other, and this will not change until we become capable of reanimating our political systems and using them to stage a fundamental intervention that changes our future by setting us on a new course.

Historic Challenges

As others in this collection have already noted, the gap between rich and poor in Britain is now as wide as it has been for over a century. This gap has a huge effect upon civil society. It foments envy. It breeds antagonisms. With every year that passes it becomes harder to maintain the

pretence of an inclusive social order that values and welcomes all. Of course, and despite what the media tell us, western societies remain very rich indeed. The problem is that this wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few. The rich have successfully cast aside any obligation they might once have felt to mainstream civil society (see Chapter 13 in this volume). They have abstracted themselves from the social, and tend to look back at it with a mixture of fear and contempt. They do not live in real neighbourhoods, and they rarely make forays into public space. Their interactions with others are often contractual, and these interactions always take place in the shadow of their own abundant wealth. The super-rich today, it appears, exclude themselves from the social. They set themselves apart from it, and imagine themselves to have transcended its rules and responsibilities. They are sovereign individuals who recognise no external authority that might force them to abandon the pursuit of their own economic self-interest.

At the other end of the social scale we have growing numbers of people who cannot access the things that appear to symbolise full social inclusion. Traditional working-class work has all but disappeared. Production has been shifted to low-wage and low-regulation economies in the developing world, and members of Britain's old industrial class have been forced to compete with one another for insecure jobs that are often completely devoid of the positive symbolism usually associated with traditional working-class work. Working in a shipyard, in a factory or down a coal mine could be difficult and demanding, but, for the most part, it paid enough to raise a family. Industrial jobs were often quite secure. Workers could plan for the future. They could set down roots and live a life free from the perpetual anxiety and insecurity that hangs like a cloud over contemporary labour markets in the de-industrialised west. Sociological studies of life on the shop floor tell us that the industrial worker was often able to retain the belief in the value of their own labour. Skills were considered important and worthwhile, and it was possible to imagine contributing to a workplace community composed to others with whom they shared a great deal. In some cases the industrial worker also carried with them a vague sense that in their daily labours they were doing their bit to drive the nation forward and out of the gloom and want that enshrouded the first third of the twentieth century.

During the fifties and sixties, things improved rapidly for the working class. Work became safer and wages rose to the extent that the worker and his family were able to access the new forms of consumerism that were transforming the nation's cultural life. Of course, this progress was not a gift bestowed upon the lower orders by a magnanimous modern capitalism. This progress was won by the political organisation of the working class and its steadfast refusal to capitulate to the interests of capital. During these years it remained possible to imagine an alternative to capitalism. Left wing radicalism still existed across the continent, and it was in capital's best interests to take a seat at the negotiating table. Capitalism was forced to abandon the aggressive asocial accumulation of the pre-war years, it was forced to contribute higher taxes, and it now had an interventionist state to deal with. However, capitalism survived, and, as the system rumbled onwards, social democracy integrated the radicals at the margins. Capitalism's fundamental exchange relation did not change in the middle third of the twentieth century. Modern capitalism was not kinder and more considerate. Rather, politics constrained capitalism's inherent drive to commodify reality and squeeze from it every last drop of surplus value. The organisational logic of capitalist markets was used drive development and generate tax revenues that enabled the state to pursue positive social ends. None of this happened naturally. It required human energy and commitment, and a functioning political culture that encouraged people to think through their position in the market and the interests they shared with others.

The working class of today face a very different economic reality. Our political culture has grown sterile. Liberal individualism has achieved unprecedented success on the field of culture. The collective identities of the modern working class have fragmented into a multitude of subject positions, and the institutions that enabled working men and women to educate themselves about capitalism and their place within it have all but disappeared. Despite what many optimistic social scientists claim, Twitter and Facebook are not capable of filling the gap they have left. All are enjoined to see themselves as unique individuals who must fight hard to secure their own interests. Our politicians appear totally divorced from the reality faced by ordinary working and non-working people. They show no willingness to intervene in our economy to set us on a new

course. From time to time they acknowledge the problems that have been created by our commitment to the free market, but they always then seek to trade these problems off against the supposed benefits of an unregulated market. Now, it seems, all politicians must be committed to ensuring that capitalist expansionism continues unimpeded. Above all things, we must ensure that our gross domestic product returns to growth.

The power of labour unions has declined enormously and the Labour party has for many years been utterly dedicated to the basic principles of the free market. Few of those who work in working-class jobs are able to access the positive workplace symbolism that existed during the modern epoch. Short-term contracts are increasingly the norm, and those working in the lower reaches of the service sector expect to move quite regularly between employers. Pay is down in real terms, and growing numbers of people find themselves incapable of adopting the forms of life that signal full socio-economic inclusion. This group is often described by sociologists as 'socially excluded', but this phrase doesn't quite capture the reality of their position. Of course, consumerism lies at the core of what we mean by a 'socially included lifestyle', and many of this group remain committed if poorly resourced consumers. They do not create fundamentally different forms of culture, and they do not adopt fundamentally different values to live by. There is no stark gap between the included and excluded. Rather, they form part of a large and growing pan-continental, multi-ethnic and economically redundant social group that are forced to compete against one another for the forms of low-level service work that keep western economies ticking over while abstract financial markets continue their mad dance. Global capitalism no longer needs them as a productive force. Capital needed them as consumers, and it welcomes their involvement in new forms of digitised capital accumulation.

Sociologists have produced a number of interesting accounts of this particular marginalised group, but the vast majority of these accounts are predicated on the assumption that the best thing to do would be to re-include those who are currently excluded. But what good does this do if the fundamental mechanisms that drive 'exclusion' in the first place remain in place (see Winlow and Hall, 2013)? Most of the social exclusion literature in Britain displays a commitment

to social democratic reform, and there is not too much wrong with that. However, most analysts tend to direct their ire at the Conservative party, as if the government of the day had it within their purview to magically produce new forms of well-paid labour capable of re-establishing security and stability for the majority. Only very rarely do accounts of social exclusion wrestle with the thorny problem of global political economy.

Only an intervention of historic proportions would be capable of creating stable and rewarding forms of working in Britain's thoroughly de-industrialised and marketised economy. We cannot 'fix' social exclusion with small scale adjustments to social policy. To create meaningful labour in Britain these days would involve stepping out of global trade flows that ensure that most production takes place in established surplus economies and debt financed consumption continues in the de-industrialised west. Taking this course of action would be monumental, and the effects of such a move would, in the first instance at least, negatively affect the consumer lifestyles of the majority of Britain's citizens. These are big issues that require serious intellectual and political engagement. If we truly hope to revitalise our society and produce the forms of work that guarantee inclusion, we must honestly appraise the world as it is today. We cannot continue to occupy a restricted and sterile intellectual space that encourages us to focus only on small scale adjustments to our welfare system, or directing a little more public funding towards those who suffer most. What would it mean to truly commit to economic inclusion? Could a new commitment to green energy and ameliorating the effects of climate change produce the new jobs needed to reintegrate those at the economic margins? What would a new social democratic project look like today? Can we introduce new basic citizen's income? How would we fund such an intervention? Might state funded national and regional investment banks begin to revitalise the economies of de-industrialised zones in Northern England, Scotland and Wales? Can new technologies enable us to thinking again about central planning? How might we begin to nationalise key economic sectors without causing yet further economic distress? How can we fund a welfare system that gives us the services we want? How can we create global accord on issues related to the management of climate change? These are, I think, some of the questions we need to be wrestling with. There are no easy answers.

As we begin to think through how we might change our future, we can at least draw strength and motivation from the absolutely certainty that the path we're on leads to catastrophe. If we stay as we are, if we remain wedded to the reductive logic of the market, if we risk nothing and turn away from our most pressing problems, then much that we value and much that we take for granted these days will disappear, and life will get a lot harder for the vast majority.

An enlightened catastrophism

I conclude only with the basic claim that we must ditch unworldly optimism and adopt an approach that stresses an enlightened catastrophism. But what does this mean? First, we must consciously accept the titanic scale of the problems we face. Without concerted action now, these problems will grow and mutate and drive the production of new problems that are, at the moment, difficult to identify with clarity.

In an exercise shorn of sentiment, we must imagine what it will be like to occupy a future in which the problems we face now have been played out, a future in which, as it were, all our chickens have come home to roost. This is a future shaped by the unwillingness of our generation, and our political leaders, to act now to prevent these problems coming fully to fruition. What if we continue to do very little to prevent the incremental rise in global temperatures? What if the polar ice caps continue to melt, and methane continues to be released into the atmosphere? What if we continue to stand by as an ever greater proportion of global wealth is taken by the 1%? What if the political left continues to atrophy and new nationalist movements continue to absorb the anger and frustration of ordinary people? What if the power of global corporations continues to grow? What if we continue to fail to fund research into clean energy? What if we refuse take on the work of rebalancing our economies and integrating those currently at the margins? What if we remain fetishistically tied to oil, gas and coal? What if the possessive individualism of today continues to advance, and we fail to construct new forms of collectivism? Think about it. Discard the old trope of incremental progress, and ignore the comfort of assuming

that a range of easy solution will appear. Imagine yourself and those you love occupying that world.

Once we have imagined this future – a future that will come into being if we continue on as we are – we can begin to think again about what can be done in the here and now to set us on a different course. The shock of recognition and conscious acceptance must compel us to begin to do what needs to be done. So, ignore those who tell you to cheer up and look on the bright side. Face the future and look it square in the face, and then join with others to fashion the forms of intervention that can arrest our slow descent into the chaos of the future.

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