Prominent Centrists and the Fiction of the White Working Class

written by Phil McDuff | August 18, 2019

In the centre of the city of Manchester, there is a place called Lincoln Square, named for the statue of Abraham Lincoln which stands there. The story of how that statue came to be there is a fascinating part of working class history. The industrial North of England, reliant on raw cotton from the Confederate states to supply its mills, was suffering the effects of Lincoln's blockade of the South. Unemployment was skyrocketing, and people's lives were so impacted that the period became known as the Cotton Famine.

Yet despite this, and despite the mill owners trying to break the blockade and the real risk of the United Kingdom entering the war on the Confederate side, the mill workers of Manchester and Lancashire supported Lincoln, and the cause of anti-slavery more generally. While we should not over-romanticise the politics of the time, the prevailing sentiment among the working people of Northern England was one of support for Lincoln, despite the hardships that his war was bringing down on their heads. In workers' meetings across the region, people recognised that they had common cause with the enslaved workers who picked the cotton that fed their looms, and pressed for support of the Union. In recognition of this, Lincoln dispatched ships carrying food aid for the people of Manchester.[1]

When Robert Peston stumbled onto the internet to claim that working class people have historically preferred "a constructive relationship between the US and UK," he might well have harked back to this extraordinary period in history. He did not, though, because he was not trying to offer any real analysis, nor seeking to place events in any historical context, but rather was having an idle go at Jeremy Corbyn, who was speaking at the protest against Donald Trump's state visit. "Why does Jeremy Corbyn want to be Northern Working Class on Brexit but London Middle Class on Trump?" mused Peston, absently flattening the majority of the country into an undifferentiated mush, picking up handfuls to throw at the Labour leader without stopping to inspect their contents. This kind of abject hackery is infuriating, but it does represent an opportunity to hold a lens up to these intellectually incurious court jesters and really ask ourselves: *why the fuck are they like this?*

When Peston insisted that Corbyn speaking at an anti-Trump rally would upset the working class base, he was not referring to any particular real group of people. Indeed, this would be impossible. The northern English working classes, like every other group of people known to history, are a complex, varied, multifaceted group of people, in which of all the same virtues and vices that you'll find everywhere else on the planet are represented. What Peston refers to is, rather, a kind of platonic, immutable, ideal concept known as "the White Working Class."

A White Working Class person, definitionally, is a racist, loves the trappings of authority as represented by the Queen and military, has some vague pro-American sentiment that never extends to caring whether the president at the time is Barack Obama or Donald Trump, rejects "liberal identity politics," and so on. The phrase coined by Alberto Toscano to describe this person is "sociologically spectral". They do not exist so much as they are invoked, like a demon being summoned and bound in a pentagram, and from there put to work on behalf of the summoner, the liberal journalist. The archetypical northern ghost, dripping coal dust and broad-accented bigotry, stands between the journalist and the need to engage on any kind of moral level with the work they do as the courtiers of the powerful. "It's not us," they say, as they push their glass across the Ouija board they believe parts the veil of the M25. "It's the real, authentic, honest, noble, virtuous working class. It's those people that hate the left and Corbyn, they made us do it."

It is not that you can't find people on the streets of Bolton or Stockton who fit the useful archetype beloved by the middle class journalist. It's more that, once encountered, the journalist lavishes these people with a love and affection which is deeply weird. They are viewed not as one point of data in a complex world, but a vindication of a deeper faith, a fulfilment of ancient prophecy, the statue weeping blood to which they make joyful pilgrimage. The actually-existing 'provincial' bigots are reassuring, comforting even: everything is as it should be. They are more real than their gay neighbours, more authentic than their communist neighbours, more truly connected to the soil than their Muslim neighbours. And, should the middle class journalist ever meet a gay, Muslim, communist working class person, they will not have a change of heart, or consider the possibility that their incredibly specific definition of 'working class' might be too restrictive. Instead they will say, "how curious, how unusual." They will not re-evaluate their model of class composition: indeed, they will instinctively recategorise as middle class anybody who contradicts their notion of the ideal prole. The north of England is thus, somehow, peopled with inauthentic, middle class shelf-stackers who exist mainly as anthropological subjects for prole-whispering experts from London to study. Their political commitments—or even simply their lack of overt bigotry—overrules the more prosaic fact of their material conditions, because to allow them to be fully realised, three dimensional human beings with complex lives would throw the whole analysis into jeopardy.

Through this process, such people are, as Joe Kennedy has noted, almost incidentally marked out as less real, inauthentic, deviant, in a harmful feedback loop that the journalist neither knows nor cares about, despite their instrumental role in it. Though it would horrify someone like Peston to be accused of supporting the far right or fascism, the belief that a particular class of white person is more British, more deserving, more rooted than their neighbours who do not fit this narrow archetype is a fundamental cornerstone of far right belief. The constant reinforcement of this "truth" simultaneously empowers the right wing, bullying bigots in working class communities and disempowers their victims.

Not every lazy and wrong assumption will allow you to keep your job as a highly paid journalist in the London media. However, there is a certain package of such assumptions which runs through the national discourse like 'Blackpool' through a stick of rock . It's by no means necessary to hold these beliefs in order to get a highly-paid position as a political editor, but it certainly seems to help.

"Working class people are unsophisticated bigots" is not a conclusion that Peston or any of the other commentators have arrived at through study. It is an axiomatic belief, a foundational principle. It can never be disproved because it forms part of a constellation of carefully-balanced creeds that must always be held to be self-evident. Others include believing that the Tory party is the natural party of government; that left wing thought is childish naïveté; that the British state is, deep down, fundamentally good (and states that exist outside of its sphere of colonial influence are, deep down, fundamentally suspicious); and that if everyone just stopped bloody disagreeing with each other and 'got on with things', that the world would be a lot nicer and simpler. It is from these articles of

liberal faith that pronouncements like Peston's spring, and it is in service of them that their arguments are deployed like theologians fleshing out the doctrine of original sin.

Challenging these ideas isn't simply an attack on the ideas themselves, but on the self-image of those who occupy the Isle of Westminster and its incestuous archipelago of media establishments. And once we understand this, we have an analytic framework through which we can begin to understand the many odd and idiosyncratic tics common to this group. Their rage and fury at the impudence of left wingers who dare to be taken seriously, their wistful longing for a return to a mythological age of sensible Conservatives, their constant quest to find the ultimate centrist messiah who will restore balance to a world they find themselves increasingly unable to understand.

At its root, this comes from the self-perceived role of "centrism," "liberalism," "moderation," or any of the other terms that surround the small-but-vocal group that dominates the media discourse. Left wing thought is held to be woolly—occasionally well-meaning but basically unserious—while right wing thought, conversely, is both sensible and serious, but lacks the emotional understanding of the left. The moderate liberal's self-perceived role—as it has been envisaged since the heyday of Blairism—is to take the hard-boiled, 'rigorously-tested' economics of the right and filter out some of its inhumane 'excesses'. The fact that Brown's great experiment in moderation ended in a financial crash, or that a coalition of the right and centre enacted an economic policy which was both wilfully inhumane and economically garbage, are facts which do not fit the narrative, and are thus ignored. What use, after all, is a moderate trying to 'soften up' right wing economic policy, if that policy is to willingly destroy the economy in order to teach the poor a valuable lesson about thrift and responsibility?

It is a salutary example of the sunk cost fallacy. The discourse has been tied to this framework for decades, and many people have highly paid positions—and, more importantly, personal credibility—because of it. If these things are not true, the subtext is that many of our self-appointed best and brightest have utterly wasted the last 20 years of their lives on a fool's errand. This is unconscionable, and therefore reality must be disciplined and subordinated to the greater truth—the one that supports the self-image of people like Robert Peston.

Challenging these viewpoints is not simply an exercise in marshalling the facts, because the very conception of what is factual is precisely what's under discussion. Working class people simply have to be uncomplicated ciphers whose interests map entirely onto those espoused by man-of-the-people cosplayers like Boris Johnson or Nigel Farage. Disputing that "fact," or any of the other axiomatic beliefs of centrism, pulls on a loose thread which threatens to unravel the whole sweater, and leave the liberal establishment naked and exposed. But a system that ignores swathes of the country—their lives, their beliefs, their needs—deserves to be unravelled. We should not have to deny our existence just so that privileged people never have to engage critically with their own beliefs. It is, in a very real sense, us or them.

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1. *NS* Editor's note: Working class expressions of common cause did not, at this point, and for whatever reason, appear to extend to the Indigenous peoples being dispossessed and slaughtered by white settler governments, including that of Lincoln. At Wounded Knee, Lincoln presided over the largest mass execution in US history (to date), in which 38 Lakota Sioux were killed. The executions followed on the heels of a genocidal massacre in which at least 150 Lakota Sioux were slaughtered, indiscriminately, by settler troops who openly claimed their wish to "utterly exterminate" the Sioux people. This excerpt from David Treuer's *The*

Heartbeat of Wounded Knee is an excellent starting-point for those who want to learn more. ↩