

*Can the Working Class Still Make  
History? An Inquiry into Class Agency*

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*Dedicated to the cause of labour, the hope of the world.*

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# Abstract

This thesis asks whether the working class can still make history. The historical agent of Marxist literature is conspicuously absent from the contemporary political terrain. At the same time, the need for an agent of transformation is acute, with what Adorno and Horkheimer viewed as the negative potential of capitalist development to regress into barbarism and irrationality more evident than ever. Crisis is now endemic. Capitalism's growth imperative which compels the capitalist class to attempt to accumulate infinitely on a finite planet has driven us onto a trajectory of climate catastrophe.

The Great Recession of 2008 – one result of neoliberal capitalism's accelerating contradictions – has created a crisis of legitimacy for the dominant economic system and has engendered social and political instability. While neoliberal capitalism has endured, it has entered a post-hegemonic phase. In this thesis, I will explore these recent events using E.P Thompson's concept of working class agency in history. For Thompson, class is an active process, something that is made in human relationships.

I will argue that the resilience of neoliberalism is a result of the destruction of working class agency in the 1970s by the neoliberal project. The legacy of this defeat casts a shadow over the contemporary Left, preventing it from organising itself as a collective agent capable of challenging capitalism at this critical juncture. However, I will demonstrate that despite these great difficulties, the working class remains a historical agent of social transformation – it has been demoted but not fired from history. I will look to the history of working class agency, its victories and its defeats, with the aim of rescuing lost causes, yielding insights into the social evils we have yet to vanquish.

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# Introduction

*Five Characters in Search of an Exit* (Johnson 1961) is the 79<sup>th</sup> episode of the fantastical, Kafkaesque science-fiction show *The Twilight Zone*. In the episode, a clown, hobo, bagpiper and an army major, a group described as a “collection of question marks” - wake with no memory of how or why to find themselves stuck together in “a pit of darkness”. Host Roger Serling’s opening narration is a fitting way to begin this thesis:

“No logic, no reason, no explanation; just a prolonged nightmare in which fear, loneliness, and the unexplainable walk hand in hand through the shadows. In a moment, we’ll start collecting clues as to the whys, the whats and the wheres. We will not end the nightmare; we’ll only explain it.”

Much like the collection of question marks in *Five Characters in Search of an Exit* (Johnson 1961), humanity writ large finds itself in a prolonged nightmare. At the same time, much of sociological scholarship has only collected clues as to the whys, whats and wheres, not ending the nightmare, only explaining it. Upon sitting down to write this thesis, I realised that I cannot abide by only explaining the nightmare, that I was compelled to attempt to map a way out of it. This urge to find an exit reflects my own life path. My sociological education had awoken an anger at a capitalist world system that exploited and oppressed the vast majority for the benefit of the few. This anger translated sociological theory into praxis, as I found myself wanting to devote myself to emancipatory struggles and politics. I wanted to go beyond explaining the nightmare of contemporary life; I felt compelled to dedicate my life to not only interpreting the world but changing it, and this led me to throw myself into the trade union movement. My work as a union

organiser has inspired the subject of this thesis, which aims to provide insight into the contemporary potential for working class agency in the Global North, with particular reference to the New Zealand context. This question is asked with urgency reflecting the prolonged nightmare of the present.

The period of crisis we find ourselves in, combined with the spectre of human-made catastrophic climate change on the horizon, requires sociology to settle the debate over Weber's (2003, 304) notion of "werturteilsstreit" (value freedom) scientific enquiry once and for all. This idea that sociology should be value-free was emphasised to me as a student. It is also embedded in the excessive formalism of academic writing which disincentivises creativity and original thought. The role of the sociologist, it was stressed to me by a lecturer once, is to describe, but never prescribe. Rather than an unquestioned dogma, the question of whether Sociology should be value-free is the subject of much debate within the discipline's tradition.

These debates can be organised into two distinct but related disputes. The first dispute is methodological, concerning how hegemonic ideologies influence scientific enquiry. The second is metanormative, asking whether science should describe the world as it is or argue for the world as it should be (Ciaffa 1992, 8-9). These debates remain live within sociological thought. This is realised in the cleavage between positivism, which argues there are laws which govern the world and theory should simply describe these laws and critical theory which asserts that the 'world' is socially made through relations of power and these can be unmade (Ciaffa 1992).

Critical theory goes one step further to say that science cannot divorce itself from the social world, that a positivist science is implicated and used to reproduce relations of power (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). Critical theory therefore argues for an emancipatory ethic. Scientific enquiry cannot just describe the world as it is; it must seek to transcend what is and theorise on what

should be (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). It is within this tradition that this thesis seeks to describe the world towards mapping an exit from it. In the context of my union work, where I organise in the healthcare sector, every day I witness the human consequences and structural violence of austerity. The imposition of the logic of finance capital is omnipresent. Everywhere, patients and healthcare workers are treated as a cost on a spreadsheet, their safety, dignity and wellbeing sacrificed to meet the 'budget', a tyrannical spectre that limits the horizon of possibility weighing like a nightmare on the brains of the living. The healthcare workers I organise with remain trapped in capitalist realism, objectified, and dehumanised at work, burdened by debt and financial precarity. In our work we struggle to understand the concept of collective agency or solidarity, having never experienced the power of either. For this reason, in this thesis, I want to explore the history of working class agency and the potential for contemporary working class agency.

This focus on the history and contemporary potential for working class agency arises because despite the nightmare of the present, neoliberalism persists and there is a distinct lack of an alternative to it. There is a growing body of literature that identifies neoliberalism as having a "post-hegemonic phase" (Davies 2016, 123) in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession (Davies 2016; Dudzic and Reed 2015; Fisher 2013; Stahl 2019). This post-hegemonic phase could also be understood as an interregnum. Gramsci (1971, 276) describes an interregnum as a period of hegemonic crisis. This crisis "consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear". Møller Stahl (2019) argues the Great Depression, the economic crisis of the 1970s, and the 2008 Great Recession all brought about an interregnum.

This was a moment, according to the "foundational mythologies" of the Left, that would give "rise to revolution" – yet this did not transpire (Dudzic and Reed 2015, 351). It did not transpire because



no collective agent of historical transformation materialised; thus, “neoliberalism remains dead but still dominant” (Davies 2016, 123). This absence must be answered for. For some, the answer is to hold a funeral for the working class who have been fired from their role as the agent of history. For these theorists, it is necessary to look elsewhere for a collective agent of change, a stitched together people (Laclau 1977; Mouffe 2018; Scrnicek and Williams 2015). This turn away from class politics, which aims to “create a chain of equivalences” (Mouffe 2018, 29) between disparate groups, rejects class as the foundation for collective agency under capitalism. In this thesis, I will demonstrate the nebulous and tenuous nature of these attempts to create collective agency without class. I aim to resurrect the working class as the collective agent of change, drawing from Mike Davis (2018, 49) who charges that the working class may have been “demoted in agency”, but they have not been fired. Turning to the work of E.P Thompson (1963, 12), I argue that working class agency is created, and it is “something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships”. The failure of working class agency to materialise in the wake of neoliberal crisis demands a mapping of the obstacles to creating working class agency.

The concept of working class agency is drawn from debates within Marxism regarding the role of agency in ‘making’ history. Within sociology, this is often referred to as the “structure-agency problem”, denoting the difficulty in assigning too much explanatory power to either/or (Wright 2019, 120). The foundation of this thesis lies in Marx’s (2001, 7) argument that people “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past”. I approach the structure-agency problem in a similar vein, arguing that working class agency is the product of both. Thompson (1963) argues that the question of how working class historical agency is made has been under-theorised in Marxist thought, with class often reduced to a social structure or category. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) is a seminal text which insists that class is an active process. Thompson (1963, 318) goes against over-deterministic

histographies which stress “great figures” and “great material changes”, arguing that these histories often elide the central role of working class agency. For Thompson (1963, 179), in this determinism, “the dimension of human agency is lost, and the context of class relations is forgotten”. Thompson’s (1963) work inspired a “history from below” methodology which focuses on how working class agency has informed and created history (Featherstone and Griffin 2016, 375). Thompson’s (1963) work provides a foundation for this thesis which stresses that the development of working class agency is critical in deciding whether contemporary class struggle will end either “in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes” (Marx and Engels 2014, 63).

At the same time, while Thompson’s (1963) is an important intervention within Marxist thought, it cannot paint a full picture of contemporary potentials for working agency. Given the dialectical nature of the structure-agency problem, neither a history from below or above alone is able to illuminate the potential for working class agency, and so both are necessary. This is the contribution that Eley (2014) makes, reminding us “there is no need to choose”. In this thesis, I will not choose. I will attempt to understand how capitalism inhibits working class agency, as well as how working class agency is nonetheless made.

In this thesis, I trace the development and history of capitalist subjectivity and working class agency, demonstrating how capitalism reproduces itself, and how cracks have emerged within capitalism that have enabled agencies and activities that have challenged and shaped capitalist history. I am specifically interested in the particular development of capitalism and working class agency in New Zealand. I draw from the work of Bruce Jesson (1992; 1999; 2005), who stresses it is necessary to have an understanding of the particular history of capitalism in New Zealand to even begin to understand the political possibilities here. Jesson (1992) theorises that New Zealand is afflicted with a culture of anti-intellectualism and that this has inhibited its collective

political imagination. This work is timely, as in recent times New Zealand has been touted as a populist exception, a place which seems to have escaped the contradictions of capitalism (Vowles and Curtin 2020, 271). Rather than ahead of the curve, I argue New Zealand is in fact behind it. This is due to the fact New Zealand was able to escape the worst of the Great Recession due to its trade relationship with China (Easton 2020). Now, we are faced with a financial crisis precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Tibshraeny 2021), which appears to leave New Zealand at the same critical juncture that much of Europe, the United States and the United Kingdom were at in 2008. New Zealand has not escaped the late capitalist crisis, and therefore the question of creating a collective agency able to provide an alternative to neoliberal capitalism remains pertinent here.

The first chapter of this thesis begins by exploring this morbid moment, arguing that Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a useful framework to understand capitalism's tendency to regress into barbarism and self-destruction. I argue that human-made climate change is the epitome of this destructive impulse. The main topic of the section explores how capitalist subjectivity is created, towards understanding how working class agency is inhibited. I argue that capitalist subjectivity in New Zealand is coloured by its "colonial condition" (Jesson 1992, 37), and the specific form of "racial capitalism" (Robinson 1983, 3) that developed through colonisation. I refer to New Zealand and not Aotearoa so as not to conflate settler-society with the pre-colonial Māori world. Both racial capitalism and this colonial condition have informed class composition and repressed working class agency in various ways. I then look more broadly to Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002, 159) concept of the "culture industry" and the role it plays in creating capitalist subjectivity. I argue the culture industry remains a relevant and useful conceptual tool to understand how class consciousness is obstructed.

In the second chapter, I look at how working class agency has nonetheless emerged through the cracks of capitalism and trace a history from below of working class agency. I demonstrate that the “Old Left”, a term used to describe mass worker’s parties and the trade union movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (Taylor 2008, 7), were effective expressions of working class agency and were therefore able to respond to the crises of laissez-faire capitalism and gain power. This historic form of working class agency, however, was limited by a lack of political imagination (Przeworski 1980). This lack of imagination resulted not in transcendence from capitalism, but in the abandonment of this final goal, evident in “the historic compromise” between capital and labour that constituted social democracy. (Burchell 1992, 27). Social democracy, I will demonstrate, was made to come undone. Its eventual collapse and the resulting destruction of working class agency is still reflected in the state of the contemporary Left, which has struggled to mourn and transcend this defeat (Borealis 2018; Scrnicek and Williams 2015; Smucker 2014). In order to meet the challenges of this moment, these losses must be processed. Similarly, a reflection of this history helps us avoid historical determinism; the defeat of the organised working class was not inevitable. The 1970s were a period of crisis where capital and labour struggled for hegemony. The outcome was not predetermined.

The third chapter explores the contemporary political, social and economic terrain, tracing a genealogy of neoliberalism. The ‘neoliberal revolution’, I argue, remains the most important contemporary development in New Zealand capitalism. This revolution transformed New Zealand from one of the most egalitarian countries to one of the most unequal in the Global North (Rashbrooke 2019). Importantly, neoliberalism embedded competition and the logic of the market into all facets of social life (Davies 2014). Neoliberalism, characterised by privatisation, financialisation, the management and manipulation crisis, is the facilitation of an upward redistribution of wealth to the capitalist class by the state (Harvey 2004, 63). The real estate industry, I argue, is the linchpin of neoliberalism in New Zealand (Hickey 2020). The

commodification of housing has enriched asset owners at the expense of renting class is the social terrain in which class war is being waged (Tibshraeny 2021). The Sixth Labour Government's response to the economic crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic has only further inflated asset prices and intensified class stratification (Tibshraeny 2021; Hickey 2020). I demonstrate how the defeat of working class agency in the 1970s, and the lack of an alternative in the aftermath of the Great Recession in the Global North, has resulted in the acceleration of the crisis (Zuboff 2019). The same appears to now be happening in New Zealand. Despite this, the contemporary political condition is marked by the absence of a countervailing hegemonic force.

In the fourth and final chapter, I argue that in order to create a countervailing hegemonic force able to challenge neoliberalism, one must trace the failure and inability of the Left to mount a coherent response to the Great Recession. Scrnicek and Williams (2015, 16) diagnose the early 21<sup>st</sup> century Left as being dominated by "folk politics". Folk politics, they observe, is hostile to structure and organisation and instead focuses on spontaneous eruptions of protest and constructing bunkers to resist the encroachments of neoliberalism. This folk politics is symptomatic of retreat and defeat.

Left populism marks a promising move away from folk politics and a return to politics itself. For Jäger and Borriello (2020), Left populism is limited in that it reflects the "hard and hollow" nature (Bickerton 2013, 70) of neoliberal society and the historical disorganisation of the working class though does not enable us to transcend it. Reflecting on the limitations of both folk politics and left populism, I argue for a return to class politics and emphasise the importance of creating working class agency. Only a class politics can provide a common ground to converge disparate struggles and challenge the power of capital. These reflections on the broader Left within the Global North are useful towards thinking about working class agency in New Zealand. New

Zealand is currently at a critical juncture, creating a working class agency able to provide an alternative to neoliberal capitalism remains as crucial as ever.

# Chapter 1: Creating Capitalist Subjects

Imagine a wondrous new machine, strong and supple, a machine that reaps as it destroys. It is huge and mobile, something like the machines of modern agriculture but vastly more complicated and powerful. Think of this awesome machine running over open terrain and ignoring familiar boundaries. It ploughs across fields and fence rows with a fierce momentum that is exhilarating to behold and also frightening. As it goes, the machine throws off enormous mows of wealth and bounty while it leaves behind great furrows of wreckage. Now imagine that there are skilful hands-on boards, but no one is at the wheel. In fact, this machine has no wheel nor any internal governor to control the speed and direction. It is sustained by its own forward motion, guided mainly by its own appetites. It is accelerating. This machine is modern capitalism driven by the imperatives of the global industrial revolution. Our wondrous machine, with all its great power and creativity, appears to be running out of control toward some sort of abyss. Amid revolutionary fervour, such warnings may sound far-fetched and, as history tells us, usually go unheeded until one day, sometimes quite suddenly, they are confirmed by reality. - (Greider 1997,11)

## *The Negative Potential of History*

The importance in analysing how working class agency is made and unmade can only be understood with reference to the terrifying moment we find ourselves in. The stakes are high, and it is necessary to name the forces which have driven us to this point and continue to lead us on a trajectory of destruction. The threat of climate catastrophe (Hickel 2020) casts a large shadow over this thesis and propels a sense of urgency. Climate change constitutes an existential crisis

and poses foundational questions about modern civilisation and the enlightenment. In this section, I demonstrate the enormity of the climate crisis and its drivers in capitalism's growth imperative. I argue that Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) remains a seminal intervention which is helpful towards illuminating how the Enlightenment project and modernity itself contain the seeds of their own destruction.

I write amid a sixth mass extinction event and climate catastrophe (World Wildlife Fund 2020; Hickel 2020). Presently, one million species of plants and animals face extinction within decades as the result of capitalism's growth imperative coming up against the limitations of our finite ecosystems (Hickel 2020,). The biodiversity of Earth is being destroyed at an unprecedented rate. In 1937, 66 percent of the planet Earth's land surface, excluding Antarctica, was classified as wilderness, referring to natural environments that have not been modified by human activity (Readfearn 2020). In 2020, this number has shrunk to 23 percent (Readfearn 2020). The World Wildlife Fund (2020, 7) describes nature as in a state of "freefall" and notes that continuing on this trajectory will risk our "security and survival" as a species.

This is a view shared by esteemed climatologist John Schellnhuber, the founding director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. Schellnhuber remarked in an interview in January 2020 that "there is a very big risk that will just end our civilisation" (quoted Moses 2020). Schellnhuber is clear that the problem is "the neoliberal economic system" which underpins "high production and high consumption lifestyles" and a "religion built not around eternal life but around eternal growth" (quoted in Moses 2020). Schellnhuber's warning comes with an urgent call to action; this can be averted if we radically transform our economic system in the next decade. Even the United Nations agrees, writing in the 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report that "limiting global warming to 1.5°C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society" (Tollefson 2018).



Capitalism's growth imperative has been the subject of debate on whether this imperative to constantly expand is intrinsic to the system (Stoll 2008). For Marx (1992, 739), it is, and he argues that:

The development of capitalist production makes it constantly necessary to keep increasing the amount of the capital laid out in a given industrial undertaking, and competition makes the immanent laws of capitalist production to be felt by each individual capitalist, as external coercive laws. It compels him to keep constantly extending his capital, in order to preserve it, but extend it he cannot, except by means of progressive accumulation."

Jason Hickel (2020) points out that it is difficult to now dispute Marx's claim that capitalism is distinguished from other economic systems by the fact that it is organised around perpetual growth. For Hickel, it is the notion of profit that drives this, working according to the formula: "take more than you give back" (Hickel 2020, 84). It is this drive that "pulls ever-expanding quantities of nature and human labour into circuits of accumulation (Hickel 2020, 84). Perhaps the most frightening aspect of this is that capitalism has a momentum of its own (Greider 1997); all that is required for climate catastrophe to eventuate is for things to continue as they are.

This morbid state of affairs should lead us to question not just capitalism, but the very foundations of Western civilisation. The Enlightenment notion of history as an "intelligible process moving towards a specific condition, the realisation of human freedom" must be rejected (Little 2007, 9). This line of thought finds in history a latent reason and rationality. Imbued with rationality, historical progress is driven by the development of knowledge and progress "occurs when a new is nurtured in the environment of the old one and eventually overtakes it" (Lange 2019, 6). This is the means through which human history, through a positive dialectic in which contradictions and tensions are ultimately transcended, progresses toward freedom (Lange 2019). One of the most clarifying

critiques of the Enlightenment notion of history as progress is Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002, 21), written during the Second World War, aiming to "explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism". This question and their insight remain perhaps more salient now as it was then. Adorno and Horkheimer's project is a negative one, seeking to free dialectical analysis from its "affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy" (Adorno 1973,19). In other words, Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) reject the notion that the outcome of history will always be positive. Adorno (1973, 320) writes that "universal history must be construed and denied" because "the catastrophes that have happened and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it".

The scope of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) is large, going beyond an analysis of capitalism to critique the underpinnings of Western civilisation itself. For Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), the Second World War, and especially the emergence of fascism in Europe, had shown the negative potential for historical progress to regress and collapse into irrationality and barbarism. This collapse, they theorised, was a product of the unprecedented technological and social progress and advancements heralded by the industrial revolution (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). Echoes of Marx's (1998, 32) argument that class society ends either in the "revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes" run through the book. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) take this claim seriously and attempt to demonstrate that Western civilisation contains the seed of its own destruction. They argue it is the emergence of capitalism which provides for the realisation of this self-destruction (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). It does this through the profit motive, where goods are produced not to meet need, but primarily for exchange within the market and the sake of increasing capital accumulation. This "production for exchange" is also a feature of other economic systems, it is uniquely central to capitalism (Adorno 2001, 23). In this process, the intrinsic value of things is displaced and

dominated by exchange value (Adorno 2001, 23). For Adorno (2001, 36), this mirrors how scientific rationality is put to irrational ends. Both enlightenment rationality and capitalist production “preclude reflection” (Adorno 2001, 36). Therefore, it is fascism, not socialism, which represents the ultimate realisation of Western civilisation (Adorno 2001).

For Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), the genesis of scientific rationality being put to irrational ends is the instrumentalisation and over-rationalisation of philosophy or knowledge during the Enlightenment. Philosophy, Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) posit, has been severed from its relationship to the transcendental and critical, something that is in opposition to existing reality and attempts to see beyond the world as it is toward the world as it should be. Adorno and Horkheimer put forward that the severing of philosophy from this has made it an apologist for dominant power structures, emptying scientific enquiry of its radical potential. This development is traced to the development of positivist philosophy popularised by Auguste Comte (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). Positivism, simply put, is the notion that the world exists independent of our knowledge of it, and underlying this statement is the belief that one can make an accurate account of phenomena through sensory experience (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 30). Lester F. Ward (1895, 18), in the first volume of the *American Journal of Sociology* published, describes this as:

The most important thing to determine was the natural order in which the sciences stand—not how they can be made to stand, but how they must stand, irrespective of the wishes of anyone.

The problem with positivism is evident in this quote and its reification of society as reflecting a natural order, when it is in fact made through power relations and therefore can be unmade. The notion that philosophy should determine how things stand irrespective of the wishes of anyone

divorces it from any emancipatory potential. For Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), this werturteilsstreit (value-free) philosophy is a mirage because the reification of the social world upholds relations of domination, exploitation and power and is therefore political regardless of intent. Stoetzler (2017) notes that positivist philosophy became the scientific basis of governance by experts, enclosing knowledge and knowledge production as the sphere of the elite to be put toward reproducing relations of power.

The enclosure of knowledge denotes a fundamentally anti-democratic impulse within positivism, where the masses become objects, not subjects, of society. Stoetzler (2007) observes critical theory regards positivism as a “cult of facts and probabilities” that has “flushed out conceptual thinking” rendering people passive and our political imagination limited. This consequently paves the way for fascism, whose popularity among sections of the working class arises from the fact that people do not have the tools to understand the source of their discontent (Stoetzler 2017). Bruce Jesson (1999) points out that capitalism itself is rational in its methods but deranged in its purpose, reflecting how knowledge is put in the service of destructive forces.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s (2002) gloomy analysis written in the midst of the horrors of European fascism has often been regarded as outmoded and fatalistic, particularly in the era of neoliberal triumphalism, amid proclamations that we had reached the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1992). Now, as I write mere decades later, the potential negative dialectic of capitalist development is evident in the threat of climate catastrophe. At the same time, a resurgence in right-wing populist movements looms large (Passari 2020). Right-wing populism, I will argue, is a symptom rather than the cause of crisis, with capitalism looking to sublimate anger and resentment created through its exploitation and domination of the lifeworld towards easy scapegoats (Stoetzler 2007). The popularity of these movements among sections of the working class is symptomatic of an absence of the conceptual tools and political organisation required for people to name the true

source of their discontent. Adorno and Horkheimer wrote the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) as a warning, which went unheeded. Our current moment demonstrates the salience of their critique of the self-destructive drive of capitalism. Capitalism is destroying the life-giving planet that sustains us and all other species (Hickey 2020). Despite this, the capitalist class is compelled to continue to attempt to accumulate infinitely on a finite planet, with all rational methods put to this destructive task (Greider 1997; Jesson 1999).

### *Neoliberalism: A Political Project*

The pivotal development which set us on this destructive world-ending trajectory was the emergence of capitalism. However, this destructive trajectory was and is not inevitable, as shown by historical modes of working class agency and organisation which have resisted capitalism and altered the course of history (Thompson 1963). The dialectic and conflict between the capitalist and working class retains the potential to drive history towards a positive outcome (Davis 2018). The most significant historical development that has kept us on this negative trajectory was the emergence of neoliberalism (Hickey 2020). The first aim and goal of the neoliberal project was the dismantling of the organised working class and the destruction of working class agency (Harvey 2011). This was to enable and allow capital to dominate all spheres of the life world without resistance (Harvey 2011). It is this defeat and destruction of working class agency that has allowed neoliberalism to endure without challenge, as I will demonstrate in this thesis. In this section, I will briefly explore the genealogy of neoliberalism as a political project broadly.

Neoliberalism is a broad term. It is often used to refer to ideology, strategy, or the historical period we find ourselves in (Davies 2014). Some have critiqued usage of the concept, arguing that it is a “slippery concept...used so widely to mean such different things, that it is impossibly vague”

(Dunn 2016, 435). I sympathise with Dunn's frustration with overly broad uses of neoliberalism and agree it has consequently lost some its analytic usefulness, I maintain however, that neoliberalism remains a vital concept to understand the contemporary mode of capitalism. Neoliberalism is a distinct body of thought and political strategy; it is not simply a return to the laissez faire capitalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, nor is it merely a variant of liberalism (Davies 2014). For Davies (2014), neoliberalism departs significantly enough from classical liberal thought and laissez faire capitalism to warrant distinction. Davies (2014) argues what differentiates neoliberalism from liberalism and laissez faire capitalism is the expansion of economic principles into the social realm. For the neoliberal project, there is no separation between the public and private sphere, and everything should be governed according to the law of competition and market logic (Davies 2014). Neoliberalism, therefore, is not simply an economic framework (Davies 2014). Neoliberal thought emphasises the importance of culture and ideology as a site of political struggle and power (Davies 2014). It aims to govern social relations and govern them in a manner that promotes competition and individualism (Davies 2014).

Some theorists have argued that neoliberalism marks a retreat of the state and the decline of state sovereignty. This is due to globalisation and the totalising nature of the market and finance which can limit the independence and agency of state actors (Jesson 1999; Douglas 2000; Bickerton 2013). Despite this, framing neoliberalism as a retreat of the state is not a helpful way of conceptualising it. Rather, neoliberalism marks the reconfiguration and reorganisation of the state towards the project of expanding the competitive principles of the market (Davies 2014). As Davies (2014) points out, neoliberal ideology should not be taken at face value. Despite anti-statist rhetoric being embedded in neoliberal literature, the state is fundamental to the neoliberal project. Neoliberalism has seen an expansion of the coercive power of state apparatus, seen in the expansion of police and military forces (Davies 2014; Wacquant 2004). Perhaps it would be

productive to view the reconfiguration and reorganisation of the state under neoliberalism as the retreat of democracy and an attack on the sovereignty of the people (Brown 2019).

For Wendy Brown (2019), neoliberalism is a project that aims to marketise and rationalise politics. Brown (2019) argues that neoliberalism is actively hostile towards democratic principles and the notion of people ruling themselves. Neoliberalism in practice views democracy as an obstacle and impediment towards achieving market aims and goals. There are many concrete examples, but none starker than Milton Friedman's full-throated support for the coup d'état in Chile in 1973 against a democratically elected socialist government (Klein 2017). Following the coup d'état, the military dictatorship government led by Augusto Pinochet worked closely with neoliberal intellectuals from the Global North to institute radical market-reforms, and Milton Friedman referred to this as "the economic miracle of Chile" (Klein 2007, 81). In this case as in many others, the coup d'état enjoyed the support of the American state apparatus, in particular the Central Intelligence Agency (Klein 2007). This particular case is one example of how the neoliberal project has relied on coercive state and military power to achieve its political aims. In New Zealand, neoliberalism was also enacted without democratic mandate by way of a "bureaucratic coup", as I will elaborate on in Chapter 3 (Jesson 1987, 42). Though this bureaucratic coup lacked the outward violence of the coup d'état in Chile, it too reflects neoliberalism's anti-democratic impulse.

This thesis emphasises the importance of David Harvey's (2011) conception of neoliberalism as a political project of the capitalist class. Harvey (201) describes neoliberalism as a collective response by capital to the power of the organised working class in the face of the economic crises of profitability that defined the 1960s and 70s. This crisis led capital to become increasingly uneasy with the historic compromise between labour and capital in the post-war era. This compromise would need to end in order to increase profitability, and as a result, the organised

working class would have to be defeated (Hobsbawm 1981; Harvey 2011). Neoliberalism was therefore a counterrevolutionary force which sought to reassert capital's dominance over the social world, foreclosing the horizon of possibility and the ability to imagine anything beyond capitalism (Harvey 2011). Mark Fisher (2009, 12) refers to this foreclosure of imagination and possibility as "capitalist realism", defining this with reference to Jameson's (2003) notion that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism". For Fisher (2009), it is not only that we are repeatedly told there is no alternative, but that it becomes almost impossible to imagine an alternative. Harvey's (2011) understanding of neoliberalism as a political project is important in creating cracks in capitalist realism. Neoliberalism was not an inevitable development, the consequence of economic forces beyond control, but instead was the site of capitalist class struggle that emerged victorious after a political struggle for hegemony with organised labour. Neoliberalism came about during a period of crisis which opened space for an alternative. Now, we appear to have entered another period of crisis, perhaps even greater than anything that has come before, given the existential threat of climate change and the potential that it could end human civilisation itself.

This state of affairs should not immobilise us with despair and anxiety. The world is not only pregnant with the seeds of its own destruction; it is also pregnant with the possibility of a better world. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) were inspired by radical elements of the Enlightenment which put knowledge in the service of emancipation. As Marxists, they saw a dialectical potential for emancipation in capitalism's reification of technology and the means of domination (Adorno and Horkheimer 2010). This reification, they argued, makes them universally available, allowing them to be put to use for emancipation rather than domination (Adorno and Horkheimer 2010). This is the same answer Deleuze comes to, insisting theory "is exactly like a toolbox... a theory has to be used, it has to work. And not just for itself" (Deleuze 2004, 208). This reflects the potential of philosophy and technology to emancipate humanity from exploitation and domination.



This is as true now as it was then, with technological advancements making socialism and a post-scarcity world possible (Bastani 2019). The missing link remains a working class agent able to realise this possibility, grounded in critical thinking and a commitment to human emancipation.

### *Capitalist Ideology and Culture*

The missing link required to realise the possibility of emancipation is working class agency. The rational methods put to mad purposes in the service of capitalism, however, also work to inhibit working class agency in a myriad of ways. It is vital to understand precisely how capitalism inhibits working class agency and instead creates capitalist subjects, in order to effectively resist it. In this section, I will explore how capitalism inhibits working class agency, and how capitalist subjectivity is created through both ideology and the materiality of social life. Drawing from the work of Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), I postulate that it is essential to have a materialist theory of how capitalist subjectivity is created. A material theory of capitalist subjectivity in New Zealand must begin with the colonisation of Aotearoa and the construction of New Zealand as a settler society. I demonstrate how the emergence of a racial capitalism (Robinson 1983) and New Zealand's colonial condition (Jesson 1992) functioned to inhibit working class agency and create capitalist subjects.

The creation of capitalism in New Zealand came to be via the violent dispossession of Māori from their land and the destruction of precolonial Māori society (Walker 2004). Settler-colonial societies are distinct from other societies in a number of interesting ways. Theorists of nation-building and nationalism (Anderson 1983; Balibar 1991) note that nations are "imagined political communities" which are constructed through national myths which strive to create a common ancestry and a sense that the nation-state is the fulfilment of a "project stretching over centuries" (Balibar 1991,

86). David Brown (2000, 25) argues that the nationalist myth “of permanent, fixed, homeland community” has immense emotional power. National identity offers a way to escape from “anxieties generated by the fragility of the sense of self, the ego, in the face both of the complex ambiguities inherent in relationships with the external modern world, and also of the disintegrative incoherence of the inner, psychological world” (Brown 2000, 25). Through national identity, we are able to imagine a stable identity that occupies a place within the cohesive social world of the nation state.

The relative youth of settler societies creates “anxieties of belonging” among settlers whose national identities are rendered unstable, fraught and contradictory by indigenous history and resilience (Slater 2019). This is because settler societies are haunted by what Derrida (1993) argues is the persistence of the past and the ghosts of lost futures. This phenomenon is what Derrida (1993, 79) terms “hauntology”. While Derrida discusses hauntology with reference to his belief that Marxism would continue to haunt Western society after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, it can be easily applied to the settler-colonial context. Settler-colonial society is haunted by the ghosts of lost indigenous futures. The “anxieties of belonging” with settler society lead to an overcompensation in the form of aggressive nationalism (Slater 2019). It also feeds ideologies of racial supremacy, which justify and legitimise colonisation by erasing the humanity and history of the colonised. The haunting of settler society by lost indigenous futures leads to an effort to selectively remember and forget colonial history, eliding and obfuscating its violent genesis. This selective remembering and forgetting is critical to nation-building projects but is especially so to settler societies (Anderson 2006). Colonial amnesia allows settler society to repress insecurities over belonging and the violent dispossession and continued oppression of indigenous people. Colonial amnesia is pervasive in New Zealand, famously reflected in comments by former Prime Minister John Key when he remarked on the radio in 2014 that New Zealand was “settled peacefully” (Godfrey 2015).

The primacy of race in settler society inhibited working class agency as national identity and racial hierarchies between Pākehā and Māori took primacy. The ideology of race was a powerful tool in inhibiting class consciousness. W. E. B. Du Bois (2017, 2122) describes how the “psychological wage” of whiteness within racial capitalism provides the white working class with a social status bound to their ‘race’. Working class Pākehā internalised this “psychological wage” and their newfound racial status. It is for this reason that I believe the concept of ‘racial capitalism’ is useful in understanding the development of capitalism in New Zealand. Racial capitalism is a term developed by Cedric Robinson (1983, 2), which describes how, contrary to Marx and Engels’ belief that capitalism would “rationalise social relations and create class consciousness”, the opposite has occurred. Robinson (1983, 3) argues that racialism and nationalism both as an “ideology and actuality” inhibited working class agency. It did so through the racial ordering of settler society, which inhibited the “extrication of the universality of class from the particularisms of race”. For Robinson (1983), nationalism converges the radical ordering of society with the interests of the local capitalist class. For Pākehā settlers, the “psychological wage’ offered to them by their status as white, inhibited the development of a truly universal class consciousness.

Melamed (2015, 1) describes how racial capitalism develops through capital accumulation which produces “relations of severe inequality among human groups--capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value”. The unequal differentiation of human value serves a dual purpose according to Federici (2004). For Federici (2004), hierarchies of difference are a precondition for capitalism, in that they justify dispossession and exploitation. Racial capitalism therefore emerges specifically to justify the dispossession and subjugation of

colonised people. Beyond providing a justification for the violence of colonialism, these hierarchies of difference organise a division of labour along racial and gendered lines by creating social distance and hierarchies within the labouring classes. This is essential to understand how working class agency is inhibited within racial capitalism.

The human cost of colonialism is incalculable. However, I will restrict my discussion of colonialism to how it creates capitalist subjects and inhibits working class agency. Racial capitalism creates social distance and hierarchies within the working class. Racial capitalism, therefore, inoculates the Pākehā working class from class consciousness and solidarity with Māori, despite the fact that this would be in their interests. For Taylor (2008, 13), the organised expressions of working class agency that did emerge in New Zealand were limited as a result. The Pākehā working class largely saw working class struggle in purely economic terms, suffering from a race and gender blind spot which limited the scope and imagination of their anti-capitalist politics. As a result, the Old Left, a term used to describe the trade union and electoral socialist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, focused predominantly on organising manual waged workers in the formal economy. This narrow focus meant that the 'working class' movement was dominated by Pākehā working class men (Taylor 2008). This was a clear limitation of the Old Left and represented a missed opportunity to converge disparate struggles towards a common goal.

Race and the primary of the hierarchy of privilege between Pākehā and Māori in settler society inhibited the development of working class agency and the potential of the Old Left. Jesson (1992, 3), however, also notes other ways in which what he calls New Zealand's "colonial condition" inhibited working class agency. Jesson (1999, 113) once described New Zealand as "an intellectually shallow country...it has lacked the institutions needed to sustain a vigorous working class politics. The union movement has never been more than a bureaucratic shell. The universities and the public service have been populated by timeservers". This intellectual

shallowness was a result of colonialism. Jesson (1992, 3) explains that New Zealand was colonised “as a commercial enterprise”, with most of the early settlements founded by “companies whose purpose was to speculate in land”. The nascent settler-state played a crucial role in creating infrastructure and facilitating the theft of Maori land through state coercion and violence. The centrality of the state in facilitating the colonisation of New Zealand meant New Zealand became a “state-created society” (Jesson 1999, 33). Easton (2020, 882) draws on Jesson’s comments about New Zealand’s intellectual shallowness, characterising New Zealand society as a “hollow society” with “few independent institutions between the central government and the people”. For Jesson (1992) and Eastern (2018) this hollow society was a result of colonialism. This state-led colonial project has meant that New Zealand lacked and has never developed the independent institutions to challenge capital or the colonial state. In addition to this, for Jesson (1992, 3) the “unsettled conditions of frontier society” created a highly individualistic culture, and this, he suggests, also inhibited class consciousness.

Colonialism and racial capitalism in New Zealand inhibited working class agency through the creation of a Pākehā subject who benefited from the psychological wage of whiteness, and a position of privilege and status over Māori. This inhibited the emergence of a class consciousness. Settler society, at the same time, is haunted by the violence of colonialism and indigenous history and lost futures, and this results in anxieties of belonging that further entrench ideologies of racial supremacy and colonial national identity to compensate (Slater 2019). The relative openness of settler-society and the centrality of the state also contributed to a hollow individualistic society, which lacked social texture and a culture of intellectual enquiry (Jesson). The modes and expressions of working class agency that did emerge in New Zealand were limited by their anti-intellectualism and blindness to race and gender.

The particular settler-colonial condition of New Zealand exposes one way in which capitalist subjectivity is created through ideology and the materiality of social life. For Adorno and Horkheimer (2002; 2010), capitalist ideologies' ability to inhibit class consciousness was cause for pessimism about the prospects of working class agency. The regression into barbarism that they witnessed with the rise of European fascism was realisation of Western civilisation's self-destructive tendency (Adorno 2001; Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). This realisation, however, was only possible because a countervailing working class agency was not able to emerge in great enough numbers to defeat these forces. This led them to theorise that despite the clear exploitation of the working class, a capitalist culture and subjectivity existed which inhibited and prevented class consciousness.

For Adorno and Horkheimer (2002, 342), what they termed the culture industry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was an important development in the solidification of capitalist subjectivity. Adorno and Horkheimer begin with explaining the culture industry in "technological terms". This refers to how technological advancements have made it possible to create standardised and mass produced cultural artefacts paradoxically produced by exclusive institutions. The few "production centres" coupled with wide dispersal of cultural products for consumption makes no effort to hide the monopolistic character of cultural production under capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 430). These products reflect and create the world in the capitalist class' image, representing a further intrusion of capitalist ideology into the social world. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) focus on the culture industry in its potential to inhibit critical thinking and class consciousness. It does so through the proliferation of standardised and mass produced cultural artefacts, but also through organising our free time. The passive consumption of cultural artefacts enabled through the television, radio and computer technology colonised free time and changed the texture of social life. Free time is transformed into a one-sided passive exercise of consuming (Adorno 2001).

Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) compare the culture industry to propaganda. Sproule (1994, 8) defines propaganda as “the work of large organisation or groups to win over the public for special interests through a massive orchestration of attractive conclusions packaged to conceal both their persuasive purpose and the lack of sound reasoning”. Do the mass-produced and standardised cultural artefacts of the culture industry meet these criteria? The answer is yes. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that culture is no longer about critical reflection of the present towards imagining a redeemed future. Instead, the culture industry “forsakes the promise of happiness in the name of the degraded utopia of the present” (Adorno 2001, 52). In other words, the culture industry presents with a false fairy tale image of the world which elides oppression and naked domination of capitalism. It offers the working class an illusory escape from the pain of life under capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) argue we are damaged by the culture industry through the sublimation of the pain of our exploitative and alienated lives under capitalism into consumption.

In many ways, the culture industry reflects the transition from sovereign power to disciplinary power and the advancement of tools of social control (Foucault 1990, 136). Foucault charts the transition from the sovereign power of feudalism, a top-down form of social control premised on punishment and the “right to take life or let live” to the disciplinary power of modernity, which is diffuse, insidious and requires a process of ‘normalisation’. It is useful to view the culture industry as a sophisticated tool of normalisation and social control. The culture industry as a tool of social control could be seen to be evident in Adorno and Horkheimer’s (2002, 339) observation that, despite the decline in organised religion, the dissolution of pre-capitalist social relations and increasing “technological and social differentiation”, this has not led to chaos as sociologists theorised it might.

The concept of the culture industry is often unfairly dismissed for being reductionist and reflective of the monoculturalism of early 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism. Further, Adorno and Horkheimer's pessimism about the prospects for working class agency, it is charged, is simply a projection of the political defeats they had lived through (Hohendahl 1995; Solty 2020). These criticisms seem to confuse the subject of Adorno and Horkheimer's (2020) critique, which is not a specific mode of capitalism but rather the culture of capitalism. I would argue these criticisms have not held up with time. With the advent of the internet and social media, mass culture is even more integral to and embedded in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. The working class has never been more culturally integrated into capitalism and we must seriously consider the implications of this development. In addition to this, in the absence of a counter-hegemonic class politics able to challenge capital in a period of systematic crisis, I find it difficult to find fault in Adorno and Horkheimer's (2010) pessimism either. Their pessimism does not foreclose the possibility of the future or working class agency, but it also does not offer false hope or comfort. Instead, it forces us to confront our condition, which, while painful, is required to transcend it.

It is possible now to trace the genealogy of mass culture and consumerism as an organised response by capital to the risk of overproduction as capital accumulation and production accelerated in the post-war boom era (Cohen 2004). Adam Curtis (2002) traces this genealogy in the BBC documentary *Century of the Self: Happiness Machines* which outlines how corporations employed psychological techniques to manipulate and encourage mass consumption. This was not a hidden conspiracy, but an openly stated aim of the business community. Paul Mazur of the Lehman Brothers wrote in the Harvard Business Review in 1927 that business "must shift America from a need to a desires culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things even before the old have been entirely consumed. We must shape a new mentality in America. Man's desires must overshadow his needs" (Lubin 2013). Mazur's comments here capture how the new subject of capitalism was socialised through mass culture



to channel their desires into consumption and the very system which exploited and oppressed them. For Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), the emergence of the culture industry partially explained something that had eluded Marxists: how the working class became passive.

For Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), the culture industry inhibited working class agency. It created subjects who were passive consumers. This is not to say that propaganda and tools of social control did not exist before the development of mass culture, but rather technological progress had armed the capitalist class with tools of social control markedly more advanced than anything prior. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) argue we are damaged by the culture industry through the sublimation of the pain of our exploitative and alienated lives under capitalism into consumption. The damaged capitalist subject is domesticated, trained to relieve their pain through consumption rather than social or political action. They are also trained to be instrumental about their own lives, exuding a single-minded ambition for their capitalist future. Finally, and most importantly, they are half-educated through culture, with the media becoming a site of truth. Cultural knowledge becomes a form of social capital and thought becomes pre-formed and standardised. This produces an ever-present authoritarian tendency latent in capitalist society.

The culture industry remains an integral part of neoliberal capitalism (Fong 2020). While wages and working class wealth have declined, mass consumption is now made possible through cheap and widely available credit, hiding the contradictions and unsustainability inherent in the system. This is evident in New Zealand where since the 1980s, when adjusted for inflation, household debt has increased from \$35 billion in the 1980s to \$315.4 billion in 2020. New Zealand now has some of the highest levels of household debt in the OECD (Brook 2020). The culture industry of neoliberal capitalism, especially considering the internet and the ubiquity of social media, is more arguably advanced and pervasive than Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) could ever have anticipated. The entire architecture of the internet, whose economic viability is driven by

omnipresent surveillance to allow for hyper-targeted personalised advertising, invites us to consume at unprecedented rates. Digital media provides an abundance of algorithmically suited yet standardised media to consume. Social media invites us to become commodities and view others as commodities within the social marketplace. Cultural knowledge is segregated and siloed off according to demographics and political persuasion via algorithms. Thought and opinion are not only pre-formed and treated as truth, but they are also removed from any points of difference. As Fong (2020) points out, this has made the authoritarian tendency of capitalism more pronounced, writing there is a “lack of patience for anything that doesn’t fit neat formulas”, a “constant amazement at just how evil *other* people can be” and all of this is evoked to “cover up a basic denial about the contradictions of capitalism”.

In this chapter, I have outlined how working class agency is inhibited and capitalist subjectivity is created through the structure and capitalism’s culture industry. A purely economic analysis of capitalism misses this vital and material process. What should be apparent from this is that in order to challenge capital and create working class agency, Left politics needs to struggle to create a new working class agency that desires a world beyond capitalism. Working class organisations with relationships to communities have historically served this function as secular churches where the working class is constituted as a political subject. In chapter 2, I will trace historical expressions of working class agency that emerged in the cracks of capitalist realism, illustrating how working class agency was made in spite of all odds.

## Chapter 2: Creating Working Class Agency

Reflecting on the lack of contemporary working class agency and the manner in which capitalism and the culture industry inhibits its creation, it is helpful to trace how, despite this, working class agency has been created. E.P Thompson's (1963) scholarship on working class agency, it has been posited, was a response to the culture industry's monopoly over cultural production, constituting an attempt to preserve working class culture (Kellner, Gigi and Durham 2001). I employ E.P Thompson's (1963, 214) concept of class as an active process, emphasising the "dimension of human agency in the making of history". For Thompson (1963), the development of the working class owes as much to agency as conditioning. Therefore, class is not simply a structure but "something which happens and can be seen to have happened in human relationships" (Thompson 1963, 12).

The working class were not simply created "by patterns of capital accumulation and market competition but also by the ideas, aspirations and struggles of workers striving to influence the conditions of their lives" (McNally 1993). For McNally (1993), Thompson (1963) went against what he saw as "mechanical and abstract system of thought and politics that paraded as Marxism". The emphasis was to reject forms of socialism that "liquidated the ingredient of humanity" and develop a history from below which aimed to trace the real struggles of real people (Callinicos 1979,1). Thompson's (1963) history from below is an essential methodology towards the understanding of the making of collective agency. The presentation of history as a "series of interlocking events each of which is fully determined by the other" leaves us with "a post facto determinism" (Thompson 1963, 214).

Thompson (1963) aims to problematise the notion that the working class is passive and simply reacting to external events which determine its fate. At the same time, this history from below does not seek to reduce history to language and discourse, nor deny how structure creates the conditions in which people make history. Thompson (1963, 392) does, however, reject the totality of capitalism and capitalist ideology, writing that “no ideology is wholly absorbed by its adherents: it breaks down in practice in a thousand ways under the criticism of impulse and experience”. For McNally (1993), the driver behind Thompson’s work is to find “the cracks within the heavy structures of society which enable agency and self-activity to bend history, to shape the direction of things”. The point of recuperating struggles in this chapter then is to force open the “cracks in history which will allow us to make a better future” (McNally 1993).

I focus on the development and expression of working class agency in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a particular emphasis on the history of the Old Left in New Zealand. I trace the development of political expressions of working class agency seen in the emergence of socialist and workers’ political parties. In charting the trajectory of electoral socialism and social democracy, the historical compromise between labour and capital, I argue that the eventual defeat of the workers’ movement and social democracy was not inevitable, and it is necessary to reassess and open the cracks in history, towards creating a better future.

The importance of this reassessment should not be understated. In the aftermath of the defeat of the organised working class movement and the ‘neoliberal revolution’, these histories have been forgotten. The dismantling and decline of working class organisation and institutions have meant that the link between the historic and contemporary Left has been severed (Borealis 2018). The contemporary Left has almost no access to the institutional and generational knowledge of their forebears. Despite this or perhaps because of it, the contemporary Left suffers from nostalgia (Richardson 2011) and constantly attempts to conjure up spirits of the past in their service yet

fails to do so convincingly. The profound historical ignorance of the contemporary Left is in desperate need of remedying, and these historical defeats must be mourned if we are to ever transcend them.

### *The Old Left*

Dylan Taylor (2008, 13) demarcates between two significant phases in the Left's development in New Zealand. The first phase, beginning in the 19th century, which he terms the Old Left was characterised by "state-focused anti-systemic movements". The second phase, the New Left emerging from the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, challenged the conservatism, institutionalism and class reductionism of the Old Left (Taylor 2008). The term Left originates from the French revolutionary period, where following the revolution of 1789 and the abolition of the monarchy, the newly established National Assembly convened to deliberate on the future of France (Taylor 2008). Those seated on the left of the chamber wished to advance the stated goals of the revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity. Those on the right, composed of the more reactionary bourgeois elements of the revolution, did not (Taylor 2008).

The Old Left developed two organised arms. The first to emerge was the industrial arm of the working class, taking the form of the trade union movement which represented the collective interests of the working class in industrial/workplace struggles (Taylor 2008). From these industrial struggles, a political wing developed focused on contesting power through electoral means. These developments followed the emergence of industrial capitalism and urbanisation which produced an industrial working class who lived and worked closely alongside each other (Taylor 2008). This proved fertile ground for social solidarity among the working class who formed unions and guilds to represent their interests (Ongley 2016). It was through these struggles for better living conditions and wages that a working class agency and politics began to take form.

One of these forms was socialism: a political, social and economic philosophy that developed a critique of capitalism and urged for the creation of a new system (Przeworski 1980). For socialists, this was to happen through the socialisation of production and the abolition of private property (Marx and Engels 2014).

Marxism and socialist thought are often conflated, eliding the long history and diversity of socialist thought that existed prior to Marx's own contributions. Socialism should be viewed as a political expression of working class interests, though I would not conflate socialism with working class politics despite the longstanding relationship between the two, simply because working class politics is diverse and multifaceted (Sunkara 2019). The dominant strain of working class politics in New Zealand was electoral socialism (Taylor 2008; Martin 1996). This electoral socialism saw the need for the nascent working class to have a political organisation representing their interests contesting power at a national level. Other strains of working class politics, such as anarchism and militant unionism, were also present though marginal in New Zealand (Martin 1996). These factions rejected any engagement with electoral politics and were openly critical of electoral socialism (Martin 1996).

Compared to their British and European contemporaries, working class organisations and parties in New Zealand were comparatively weak (Jesson 1992). This in part can be attributed to the specific racial capitalism that developed in New Zealand (Robinson 1983), the hollowness of New Zealand civil society (Easton 2020; Jesson 1992) and the culture of individualism that developed via the openness of settler-colonialism (Jesson 1992). An early development that influenced the trajectory of the trade union movement in New Zealand was the settler state's "early, extensive and centralised regulation of both industrial relations and labour conditions" (Martin 1996, 167). The incorporation of the trade union movement and the centrality of the state in this period led to an emphasis on electoral socialist movements, as well as an increasing political moderation and

a culture of conservatism within the Old Left (Taylor 2008). The trade union movement in New Zealand focused on developing a political wing to contest state power. This ultimately culminated in the establishment of the New Zealand Labour Party in 1916. These developments mirrored political developments in the United Kingdom, with the founding of the British Labour party in 1900 (Martin 1996). The New Zealand Labour party formed through the amalgamation of different organisations, though there were stark political divisions between them (Franks and McAloon 2016). Radical elements of the trade union movement favoured militancy, while moderates emphasised the importance of progressive reform. The Waihi miners' strike in 1912 and the forceful suppression of the strikers by the New Zealand government, which ended in the death of a striker, provided the impetus for these groups to put aside their differences and establish a united front in the form of the Labour party (Franks and McAloon 2016).

The Labour party was founded with the "explicit purpose of putting more manual workers into parliament to represent and pass legislation in the interests of the class of which they were not only representatives but also members" (Gustafson 1992, 2). The emergence of worker's parties through Europe in the early 20th century reflected that "the [worker's] struggle requires organisation, it demands a permanent apparatus" (Prezworski 1980, 29). This was no different in New Zealand. The decision to engage in electoral politics inspired controversy within some quarters at the time, as the act of taking part "shapes the movement for socialism and its reaction to workers as a class" (Prezworski 1980, 28). Simultaneously, however, engaging in electoralism seemed necessary for the movement to establish mass support among workers.

This is the contradiction laid out by Rosa Luxemburg, who described the workers' movement having to chart passage between the "abandonment of the mass character, or the abandonment of the final goals" (Prezworski 1980, 28). What was required was no less than the unification of the masses through immediate reformist demands with the long-term goal of socialisation of the

means of production and the abolition of private property. This was the risk embedded: that participation in electoral politics might obstruct the realisation of this long-term goal of the workers' movement. Prezworski argues that "working for today and working toward tomorrow appear as contrasting horns" (Prezworski 1980, 28).

Socialists in Europe were acutely aware of the dilemma of "working for today and working toward tomorrow" (Prezworski 1980, 28). In addition to this, they voiced concerns that engagement in electoral politics would mean forsaking other political strategies. Prezworski (1980, 32) refers to this as the 'tactical dilemma'. César de Paepe, the founder of the Parti Socialiste Brabançon, wrote in 1877 that 'in using our constitutional right and legal means at our disposal we do not renounce the right to revolution', urging the workers' movement to keep the long-term goal of social transformation in sight (Prezworski 1980, 38). In the same vein, Swedish socialist Axel Danielsson argued in 1889 that socialists should "not commit themselves to a dogma regarding tactics that would bind the party to act according to the same routine under all circumstances" (Tingsten 1973, 362).

Despite this, Prezworski (1980, 30) argues that once universal suffrage was achieved, the choice between legal and extra-legal tactics had to be made; either the party were "constitutionalists or not". To take industrial action to force political change after failing to get a majority at the polls undermined the democratic process and, it was theorised, resulted in a loss of legitimacy and state repression. By the early 20th century, experiences of violent state repression of mass strike action had meant many workers' parties moved exclusively toward electoral tactics (Prezworski 1980).

This commitment to democracy and the rule of law meant that at times electoral socialist parties would be required to restrain militant unionism and spontaneous actions, as both carried risks for



their electoral progress (Prezworski 1980). This understandably put a strain on the relationship between the party and radical elements of its working class base. For Eric Hobsbawm (1973), this is the contradiction that lies with electoral socialism in capitalist democracies. The party's commitment to the rules of the game meant that revolutionary opportunities were missed "because the normal conditions in which it must operate prevent it from developing the movements likely to seize the rare moments when they are called upon to behave as revolutionaries". Hobsbawm (1973, 15) continues, arguing that "there is no simple way out of this dilemma [...] being a revolutionary in countries such as ours just happens to be difficult".

In contrast to their European and British counterparts, these questions of purpose, strategy and tactics were not given much consideration or ever reconciled by the New Zealand Labour Party (Jesson 1992). This could be put down to the lack of ideological and intellectual rigour, with the New Zealand Labour Party being "a party of interests rather than ideas" (Shaw 1996, 3). This lack of ideas and intellectual rigour speaks to the weakness of working class institutions in New Zealand. Labour being a party of interests rather than ideas is reflected in their explicit purpose of having working class representation in parliament to pass legislation in their interests. Required in this process is a relation of representation imposed between the party and the working class (Prezworski 1980).

This relation is a by-product of the nature of representative democracy. In this relation of representation, more tensions between the working class base and the party emerge. This is what Prezworski (1980, 30) calls an "organisational dilemma", arguing that an organisation requires a salaried bureaucracy to undertake organisational work. This is necessary, but simultaneously results in the "embourgeoisement" of the movement (Prezworski 1980, 29). The salaried bureaucracy becomes a social class within itself and therefore has diverging social positions and economic interests to the working class, putting a strain on the relation of representation.

Compare the contemporary New Zealand Labour Party to the early Labour Party, and the change in the class character of elected members is evident. The majority of the First Labour government was made up of politicians from the manual working class (Van Veen 2017), whereas the Sixth Labour government is composed of university-educated professionals (Stephen 2020). While the New Zealand Labour Party emerged from the union movement, it has never been able to take the working class for granted, as noted by Josh Van Veen (2017, 21) who demonstrated analysing data from New Zealand election results that “it is the working class that has put Labour into power, and the working class that has kept Labour from power”. The relationship of representation between the Labour party and the working class has thus never been guaranteed.

This contested relationship is contrary to the assumptions of electoral socialists who were confident that, by representing the interests of workers and contesting elections, they were assured the working class vote (Prezowski 1980). It was believed that this guaranteed working class vote would inevitably lead to socialism, as the workers’ movement was a majoritarian movement. This majoritarian movement, it was theorised by socialists such as August Bebel (Derfler 1973), would be able to exploit the contradiction between liberal democracy and the dictatorial power of the capitalist class over the means of production. These hopes of electoral triumph were “almost immediately vindicated by the electoral progress of socialist parties” across the Global North, as “practice confirmed theory” (Prezowski 1980, 36).

The movement expanded from thousands into millions. This led the German socialist August Bebel to gesture that he was “convinced that the fulfilment of our aims is so close that there are few in this hall who will not live to see the day” (Derfler 1973, 58). The New Zealand Labour Party also saw success. After their founding in 1916, they quickly went on to win eight seats in parliament in the 1919 election, something that shocked the political establishment and the New Zealand capitalist elite (Franks and McAloon 2016). In the aftermath of this electoral success,

Labour would go on to distance themselves from their more radical policies, such as their proposal to nationalise farmland (Franks and McAloon 2016). Subsequent elections saw Labour continue to increase their voting share, with the 1928 election putting Labour in the position of kingmaker, as neither of the other parties could form a government without them (Franks and McAloon 2016). Labour went into government with the United Party, a relatively new party that was founded from the remnants of the previously dominant Liberal Party. This coalition government quickly collapsed in the aftermath of the Great Depression, after the United Party pursued policies that were hostile to workers. The United Party went on to form a coalition with the Reform party and narrowly won the 1931 election with Labour in the opposition (Franks and McAloon 2016).

In 1935, however, New Zealanders impoverished by the Great Depression and dissatisfied with the economic status quo elected the Labour Party to government with a significant majority (Franks and McAloon 2016). The electoral success of the New Zealand Labour Party and other electoral socialist parties across the Global North was made partly made possible by industrial capitalism which produced an urban working class that worked and lived alongside each other, creating ripe conditions for social solidarity and collective organisation (Ongley 2016). What is often missed in working class histories of New Zealand is Māori workers' organisations and the relationship between the Old Left and Māori organisations, who played a role in the electoral success of Labour.

The Rātana movement, a pan-iwi political movement founded by Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana, was a religious and political movement holding that the “two have to be in balance” (Whanganui Chronicle 2016). The political element of the Rātana movement centred around upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In 1928, Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana took the name Piri-Wiri-Tua, meaning the champion of the people. The Rātana movement succeeded in bringing disparate iwi together in a political movement which shared many goals with the workers' movement. The Rātana movement

understood this and expressly stood in solidarity with the workers' movement, believing their struggles were inextricably linked. Piri-Wiri-Tua often spoke of a prophecy by King Tāwhiao in 1869 that, "when the shoemakers, watchmakers, blacksmiths and carpenters rule this country then the Māori people will receive their salvation" (quoted in Franks and McAloon 2016, 99). It was this belief that led to an alliance between the Rātana movement and the Labour party in 1935. This history demonstrates the importance of understanding the diverse modalities through which class is lived and class society is organised. While the Rātana movement was aware of this, unfortunately, Pākehā workers were often blind to this, holding a blunt economic view of class. Despite this, Māori were integral to the success of the Labour Party. Rātana MPs elected in Māori electorates agreed to vote with the Labour government, with Piri-Wiri-Tua becoming a member of Labour in 1936. The result of this alliance was that the four Māori electorates were held by Rātana-affiliated members of Labour for decades after (Franks and McAloon 2016).

The First Labour government, led by Michael Joseph Savage, was elected with the help of the organised working class and the Rātana movement. The government came to power with the ambitious aim of creating a welfare state that looked after citizens from 'cradle to grave' (Boston 2019). Savage was inspired by his faith, believing that socialism was applied Christianity. Savage's aim was no less than to "bring the 'Kingdom of Heaven' closer to Earth by eradicating income poverty, deprivation and homelessness, and minimising unemployment, preventable illness and financial insecurity" (Boston 2019, 25).

In less than five years, the First Labour government had constructed an extensive social security system, introduced universal healthcare, implemented compulsory trade unionism and launched a state housing program building thousands of houses through the newly established Department of Housing Construction (Boston 2019). These laudable achievements were made possible through increased state spending and tax reform. The percentage of GDP taken from taxation

increased from 15 percent to 26 percent over the course of the First Labour government. The tax burden fell primarily on businesses, landowners and the wealthiest income earners. The top rate of income tax increased from 42.9 percent to 76.5 percent (Boston 2019). The graduated land tax, a tax on landowners based on the market value of their land, was reintroduced and increased (Franks and McAloon 2016). This tax had previously been brought in 1890 by the reformist-minded Liberal government but had subsequently been abolished (Hobbs 2020). In comparison, working class New Zealanders paid little tax due to exemptions for workers earning below a certain amount and generous rebates. Through all this, an egalitarian New Zealand was briefly realised in the interwar and post-war period (Franks and McAloon 2016).

The First Labour government's success with constructing the welfare state was laudable and the product of the collective agency of working class people expressed in trade unions, the Rātana movement and the Labour party. This development of collective agency through these organisations meant that, when the Great Depression occurred, there was a historical agent that was able to provide an alternative. The tension and contradictions within the relationship of representation between these organisational forms and the groups they represented, however, is also clear. The ability of these organisations to express working class agency is a site of struggle and contestation (Przeworski 1980).

The intellectual weaknesses and lack of political imagination of the Old Left in New Zealand is also apparent in the early moderation of the Labour party, which abandoned plans to socialise industry because of the difficulty and conflict such a program would entail. Labour instead would pursue a welfare agenda inspired by the work of John Maynard Keynes (2018). While Keynes' (2018) work provided for the redistribution of capital through the state, it left the fundamentals of capitalist relations intact. This refusal to confront and transform the relations of capital was a fundamental weakness of the Old Left and laid groundwork for future defeat.

Initially, the revolution envisioned by electoral socialists was predicated on socialisation of the means of production (Przeworski 1980). Capitalism produced unjust, inefficient and irrational outcomes; this was the result of relations of private property, where the capitalist class held dictatorial control over the means of production. Swedish social democrat and future Prime Minister Hjalmar Branting remarked in 1906 that “in the basic premises of the present social order there are no satisfactory guarantees either that production as an entity is given the most rational orientation possible, or that profit in the various branches is used in the way that is best from the national economic and social point of view” (Tingsten 1973, 131).

The principal method of achieving socialist goals then, it held, was the socialisation or nationalisation of the means of production. The emphasis on organising and winning power however meant little concrete thought was given to *how* this might be achieved. When socialist parties came to power, they realised they did not know how to implement these changes (Przeworski 1980; Howard and King 1992). Not only that, but they were afraid of how capital might react, fearing capital flight and potential reactionary violence (Przeworski 1980). Caused by increasing inequality of income distribution which suppressed consumer demand and resulted in over-investment of capital and underconsumption, the Great Depression had created a crisis of legitimacy for the economic status quo and also caught the working class movement intellectually unprepared (Howard and King 1992). The crisis of legitimacy facilitated the rapid rise of electoral socialism to power throughout the Global North, but once in power they were unsure of how to proceed to realise their program. Przeworski (1980) puts this down to a lack of theoretical maturity and political imagination. Electoral socialists were ill-equipped for the technical problems and demands of enacting social transformation.

The Second Labour Government (1929-1931) led by Ramsay Macdonald in the United Kingdom is an example of this. Labour had been elected in the aftermath of the Great Depression. The government found itself amid a political and financial crisis. The orthodox and mainstream response to the economic crisis was austerity to ensure a balanced budget, restore business confidence and protect the gold standard (Mudge 2018). The Second Labour Government had no theoretical or tangible alternatives and so felt helpless in the face of economic collapse. They could not envision how to intervene in market forces, lamenting that despite being elected to offer an alternative, austerity was the only possible response to the crisis. Chancellor of the Exchequer Phillip Snowden excused this by arguing that the economic crisis meant that the material conditions were not ripe for socialist reforms (Mudge 2018). The Second Labour Government was symptomatic of the lack of political imagination of electoral socialists; they were building working class agency and winning power yet were trapped by their lack of political imagination and inability to envision an alternative.

Evident in this example is how embedded the logic of capitalist realism was at this period, signaling a profound lack of theoretical maturity on the part of the electoral socialists (Przeworski 1980). This was in part a consequence of their rapid rise into power but also their alienation from sites of knowledge production (Mudge 2018). This reflects how expertise and knowledge remained the sphere of the elite, something to be used to manage the masses rather than challenge entrenched power. Few socialist organisers and politicians had formal education (Mudge 2018). While many organic intellectuals emerged (Mudge 2018) to tackle these questions, the movement as a whole was still developing a theoretical maturity and political imagination. This lack of maturity resulted in a strain of dogmatism within the movement (Przeworski 1980). While socialists were well versed in Marxism, his work was often treated as a shibboleth rather than a source of dynamic and live scientific enquiry (Thompson 1963). The importance of Marx's work

notwithstanding, his contributions were a critique of capital, and what was required as electoral socialists took power was robust socialist imagination, something they did not have.

### *The Historical Compromise*

For better or worse, Social Democracy is the only political force of the Left that can demonstrate an extensive record of reforms in favour of the workers. - Prezworski (1980 27)

The emergence of Keynesianism provided an illusory escape from the dilemma of socialisation, as I mentioned above. Keynes' *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (2018) provided electoral socialism with a distinct policy for administering capitalist economies. Keynes' (2018) theory was that the state does not have to be the passive victim of economic downturn; instead, it should play an active role in regulating the economy in times of hardship and prosperity. During recessions, the state should increase spending and allow budget deficits to promote economic activity, and this debt should then be paid back during periods of expansion. Keynes postulated that the state should regulate and distribute the gains made through the market not just out of humanitarian concerns, but because the welfare of workers affected the welfare of all.

The state should therefore work to provide welfare to all citizens and aim for full employment. Keynes' program provided justification for engaging in electoral politics for distributive policies rather than the realisation of socialism, which allowed parties to sidestep the dilemma of socialisation. Prezworski (1980) refers to this as the substitution of socialism with the welfare state. This is precisely the trend that played out with the New Zealand Labour Party. The abandonment of socialisation was, we can now see, a historical error. The Great Depression provided an opportunity to go beyond capitalism, but instead, relations of private property and



capital ownership of the means of production were kept intact. The difference would be that the state would play an active role in mediating market forces and distributing profits. Unproductive and unprofitable sectors like healthcare and welfare services would be nationalised, but this did not indicate the intent to socialise production; rather, it indicated the acknowledgement that these sectors played an important role in facilitating economic activity (Prezowski 1980). The Keynesian revolution saw the birth of social democracy, a 'pragmatic' compromise between socialism and capitalism, where the market and private property relations remained but were constrained through regulation to ensure equitable outcomes (Jackson 2013). Social democracy, therefore, provided electoral socialists with the means to sidestep a confrontation with capital over relations of private property. For this reason, it has been called a 'historic compromise' between labour and capital (Burchell 1992, 27).

French economist Thomas Picketty (2013) argues that the historical compromise was an outlier in the history of capitalism, the result of the unprecedented post-war economic expansion. At an economic level, it was made possible through the shock of war and the disorganisation of the capitalist class who had been weakened by the Great Depression and war and were unable to effectively resist its implementation. Ironically, despite their opposition to it, social democracy rescued capital at a time of crisis and counteracted its anti-social affects. The success of Keynesianism in rebuilding the post-war economy and ushering in an era of unparalleled prosperity led to capital accepting this 'historic compromise', with Milton Friedman remarking that "in one sense we're all Keynesians now" (Akerlof 2019,171).

For Prezowski (1980), the historic compromise between capital and labour was inherently unsustainable and unstable. Social democracy required constant intervention in market forces to produce equitable outcomes as the logic and structure of the market tended towards anti-social outcomes. As a result, all that was required to undermine social democracy was state inaction.

Social democrats were also required to govern in the interest of capital and labour, as the profitability of capital was required to fund social programs, and this had the long-term effect of undermining their working class appeal (Prezworski 1980). In addition to this, the rise of the propertied middle-class and the decline of the manual working class as a result of the social mobility provided by social democracy, as well as the changing nature of work, forced social democratic parties to appeal to broader voting constituencies. Electoral socialists began appealing to voters using the language of citizenship rather than class struggle, thereby losing their class character. This had a depoliticising effect on workers who also began to see themselves as individuals and citizens rather than part of the working class (Prezworski 1980). This further strained the relation of representation between the party and the class. This retreat from class politics meant that electoral socialism lost its political and class character.

It has been suggested that the dilemmas of social democracy expounded by Prezworski (1980) have led to long-term realignment in 'class voting'. The association between social class and voting patterns has been the subject of sociological literature since the emergence of electoral socialism. The advent of election surveys has made it possible to more directly observe the relationship between class and voting (Manza, Hout, and Brooks 1995, 137-162). What the research has demonstrated is a long-term decline in the voter share of social democratic parties across the Global North. This has been hypothesised as due to a loss of working class support in contrast to middle-class support.

There is very little literature on the phenomenon of class realignment in New Zealand. Joshua Van Veen (2017) in *The Strange Death of Labourism: Class Realignment in Britain and New Zealand* looks at class voting trends in New Zealand and Britain, answering whether class voting has declined. Van Veen (2017) concludes that there is evidence to suggest a long-term realignment rather than decline in class voting in New Zealand and the United Kingdom. From

the 1980s onwards, the British and New Zealand Labour party have not won a majority of working class voters. Despite this, the New Zealand and British Labour party maintained a “competitive advantage” with working class voters until the 2010s (Van Veen 2017, 6).

As I have demonstrated in this account of social democracy, it was fraught with contradictions. The historical compromise between labour and capital proved to be ephemeral. Electoral socialists attempted to chart passage between the “abandonment of the mass character, or the abandonment of the final goals” (Przeworski 1980, 32). However, the abandonment of socialisation and the compromise of social democracy resulted in the abandonment of both the mass character and the final goals. Social democracy compelled electoral socialists to govern in the interests of capital and labour, undermining the relation of representation between them and the working class. In addition to this, predictions that, once suffrage was attained, the working class would constitute the vast majority of voters did not eventuate (Przeworski 1980). The rise of a propertied middle-class meant that a working class majority never emerged. As a result, social democratic parties were forced to broaden their class appeal to win elections.

This outcome was not inevitable, and it is conceivable that electoral socialism could have yielded a different outcome. It is not impossible to imagine that had electoral socialists developed a robust political imagination and program, they would have been able to chart passage through toward the realisation of the final goal of socialism. Instead, electoral socialist parties, through their embrace of compromise, became hollow vehicles, with an increasingly weak attachment and relation of representation to the working class (Przeworski 1980). As a result, the parties began to develop diverging political interests from the working class.

The parties also began to look different from the working class in terms of their class composition (Van Veen 2017). Consequently, electoral socialist parties ceased to be fit for purpose, captured by interest's contrary to their working class base. The compromise between labour and capital inherent within social democracy laid the groundwork for its unravelling. The political arm of the working class politics became increasingly unfit for purpose, undermining working class agency. The retreat from class struggle towards Keynesianism slowly transformed electoral socialist parties into unresponsive institutions, not attuned to the needs of the working class (Bodman 2013). Rather than give the working class movement a mass character and providing leadership, electoral socialists fell behind.

### *The New Left*

While the unfit-for-purpose state of electoral socialist parties undermined working class agency, the redistribution of wealth and the texture of working class life in the Keynesian era simultaneously created a radical working class subject and agency (Fisher 2018; Boraman 2012; Boraman 2016; Boraman 2018). This new working class agent appeared alongside the capitalist subject of the culture industry outlined in Chapter 1. Herbert Marcuse (1955, 93) once postulated in *Eros and Civilisation* that “civilisation has to defend itself against the spectre of a world which could be free” and that “the closer the real possibility of liberating the individual from the constraints [...] the greater the need for maintaining and streamlining these constraints, lest the established order of domination dissolves”.

It is from this starting point that the late Mark Fisher (2018,) begins his investigation into the fledgling new working class subject of the Keynesian era. Unfortunately, this work was never

completed as Fisher tragically committed suicide in early 2017, leaving just a rough draft and introduction entitled *Acid Communism* (2018). In this embryonic work is a reassessment of the interregnum of the 1970s. Fisher (2018) argues against readings of the counterculture and the New Left that argue it was a solely middle-class individualistic movement which was easily incorporated and served as precursor to the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005) or even functioned as the handmaiden of neoliberalism (Fraser 2013). Instead, Fisher posits that the radical elements of the movement that were incompatible with the individualistic materialist ethos of neoliberalism have been suppressed and erased. It is in these elements in which a new working class agency appeared from the cracks in capitalist realism, embodying the possibility of a better world beyond capitalism. Capitalist realism attempts to make this possibility unthinkable, and it is exactly for this reason that it is necessary to revisit moments where it was conceivable.

This new working class agency never fully developed, but the social movements that erupted in the 1960s and 70s make it possible to trace the outline of a new world that almost was. These rebellions were made possible by social democracy, which empowered working class people with a sense of unprecedented agency through the provision of basic social goods and collective working class organisation. For many, the necessities of life were no longer a site of struggle, insecurity and instability. This empowerment expanded the horizons of possibility. Historian Lewis Mumford once remarked that “every generation revolts against its fathers”, and this was true for the new generation of workers, who began to dream of freedom beyond the drudgery and repetitiveness of alienated work under capitalism (Trachtenberg 1980).

Fisher (2018, 836) encourages us to unpack the orthodox narratives about the 1960s and 70s, arguing that “capitalist realism could not have happened without the narratives that reactionary forces told about those decades”. The nostalgia focusing solely on the sexual promiscuity, drug

use and iconic music of the era misses the revolutionary fervour and experiments in collectivism that were exploding back then. The re-emergence of class and political struggle saw growing labour militancy, and mass social movements aimed at extending democracy and citizenship to groups othered and marginalised by racial capitalism demonstrate that revolution was in the air. The wave of rebellions across the world urged us to “be realistic and demand the impossible” (Tormey 2018). Rather than view the counterculture and New Left as the handmaiden of neoliberalism, we should perhaps ask whether neoliberalism was in part a response to the threat of a world which could be free. For Fisher (2018, 836), re-thinking the 1970s is almost more important than revisiting the 1960s, writing that the 1970s “was a period of struggle and transition, in which the meaning and legacy of the previous decade was one of the crucial battlegrounds. A focus on the 1970s is a necessary correction to orthodox narratives on the counterculture, which focused almost exclusively on the romance of the early period. The 1970s marked an observable radical turn, a consequence of the growing political maturity of the movement.

The intensifying of these struggles constituted a significant challenge to capital, yet ultimately, as we know, they were defeated. The reasons for this are numerous; many have sought to explain away the historic defeat of the Left during this period. Fisher (2018, 844) blames the obstructive old stewards of “social democracy” who were “backward-looking, bureaucratic and resigned to the inevitability of capitalism”. As far as he is concerned, the Old Left repudiated instead of embracing the “dreaming that the counterculture unleashed” (Fisher 2018, 1001).

Bruce Jesson (1989, 29) meanwhile, while acknowledging the conservatism and passiveness of the Old Left, was far less optimistic about the political potential of the New Left, referring to the movement as dominated by a youthful and educated middle-class. Jesson viewed its praxis as inherently liberal, representing a middle-class diversion from class politics. Further, he felt the movement was ineffectual and marginal (Jesson 1989, 29). In both Fisher (2018) and Jesson’s

(1989) analysis, there is an element of truth, but the relationship and nature of both the New and Old Left is far more complex and contradictory than acknowledged.

Boraman (2012,) examines Jesson's charge that the New Left was a "middle-class diversion from working class struggle" (Jesson 1989, 29) and his findings complicate Jesson's narrow readings of these movements. Boraman (2012) demonstrates that the New Left was not solely a "middle-class diversion" and that there was a strong working class element to the movement, describing the relationship between the New Left and working class as paradoxical. Some middle-class elements of the New Left did perceive the working class as conservative and reactionary, causing them to dismiss class struggle as outmoded and irrelevant (ibid). For these elements of the movement, class should be separated from issues of racism, sexism and homophobia. These issues of 'identity', they argued, should be the main focus of the New Left (ibid).

In New Zealand, this anti-worker and anti-class struggle sentiment was well-illustrated by New Left activist Tim Shadbolt, who allegedly exclaimed at a rally in 1970: "Stuff the workers! They will never do anything!" (Boraman 2012, 220). This is what led critics like Jesson (1989) to argue that the middle-class diversion of the New Left was undermining class politics at a critical juncture. Denis Welch (2009) concurred with this, stating that many of the student radicals of the time would later become the proponents of neoliberalism in New Zealand, citing former Prime Minister Helen Clark's history as a student radical.

Boraman (2012), however, points out that only a minority of former radicals followed this trajectory. Further, I would argue that this observed rightward drift of former radicals could be attributed to the extent of its political defeat rather than its inherently reactionary nature. I return to Fisher's (2018) comments on the contradictory nature of the New Left and the counterculture, and the narratives we tell ourselves about the era and what purpose they serve. While it is true

that there was an element of the New Left which dismissed the salience of class, the focus on this exaggerates its importance. While these elements were easily incorporated by neoliberalism, it is more important to focus on what could not be. The importance of rescuing lost causes of the past is that it might yield “insights into social evils which we have yet to cure” (Thompson 1963, 19). A history from below must always be sensitive to lost causes, echoing Walter Benjamin’s (2019, 6) hope that a “redeemed mankind might experience the fullness of its past”.

It is for this reason it is also necessary to reject Fisher's (2018) simplistic analysis of the Old Left, which he charges repudiated the new kind of working class agency, as this also does not tell the whole story. Towards the end of the 1960s, the New Left began to realise the importance of building power within and alliances with the trade union movement (Boraman 2018). The trade union movement had become increasingly militant, motivated by intensifying political attacks by representatives of capital and the economic crisis, driven by falling rates of profitability causing inflation and wage stagnation. The new kind of worker of the New Left found a home within the trade union movement. Middle-class student radicals simultaneously began to realise the importance of converging social movements with class struggle (Boraman 2018).

The events of May 1968 in France are a famous example of the convergence between organised labour and social movement radicals. May '68 began with student occupations in Paris against capitalism, consumerism and imperialism (Boraman 2018). These occupations were then joined by sympathy strikes which spread across France. Approximately 11 million workers went on strike, making it the largest general strike in French history (Boraman 2018). May '68 led to the brief collapse of the French government, with the president Charles de Gaulle fleeing to Germany. The movement was eventually suppressed, but it was generally recognised that May '68 had almost brought about a revolution in France (Boraman 2018).



These electrifying events were a source of inspiration for the New Left elsewhere who realised the importance of building relationships with trade unions. Lane Windham (2017) in her book *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* writes that in the United States, the 1970s was not an era of retreat but in fact saw millions of workers organically organising and attempting to unionise their workplaces. These workers were from historically unorganised industries and were composed mostly of people of colour, women and baby boomers inspired by new civil rights legislation. They sought to build solidarity between diverse groups of workers from diverse sectors and develop on the political victories of the civil rights era. This new diverse working class was largely located in the emerging service economy.

Windham (2017) notes that as the industrial working class were in decline, these new workers provided energy and momentum to the trade union movement. These were workers who had emerged from the New Left and the social movements, largely belonging to marginalised communities whose struggles had been ignored by the economism of the early Old Left (Taylor 2008). In this period, these workers struggled within the trade union movement to create a class politics that went beyond economism (Windham 2017). This was a class politics that recognised class struggle within broader social terrains and sought to converge them. Ultimately, these efforts were unsuccessful and perhaps too late; this new working class agent, still in embryonic form, could not defeat the highly disciplined and unified capitalist class (Windham 2017). However, in rescuing this lost cause from history, simplistic renders of the Old and New Left are complicated and the importance of converging struggles within class politics made clear.

In New Zealand, a nascent convergence between the Old and New Left was also observable. The Left inspired by May '68 sought to build, incorporate, and converge the Old and New Left. For Boraman (2018), the most significant example of this was an alliance formed between workers

and students for a protest on the opening day of parliament in June 1968. Various reports say that 3,000 to 7,000 attended the protest and it resulted in an impromptu occupation of parliament grounds (Boraman 2018). This caused the opening ceremony of parliament to be cancelled. The protest represented a myriad of causes, including rising costs of living, the Vietnam War, a proposed United States Military spy base in New Zealand, and the Māori Affairs Amendment Act 1967 which Māori saw as the “last land grab” (Boraman 2018, 37). The largest faction of protestors was striking workers, who had come to protest an order by the Arbitration Court that there would be no wage increase that year. This ‘nil wage order’ was effectively a wage cut as inflation had increased 5 percent (Boraman 2018). Boraman (2012) notes that this action was part of a nationwide strike movement which “ushered in an era of increased workers’ confidence, shop floor militancy and direct action to secure better wages and conditions”.

The alliance between workers and students and increased industrial action forced the Arbitration Court to reverse their decision and grant a five percent increase to all workers. The alliance and convergence between the Old and New Left coincided with an increasingly militant trade union movement and an uptick in strike activity. The victory and reversal of the Arbitration Court’s ‘nil wage order’ led many workers to come to the conclusion that the state was captured by the interests of capital, and it was no longer in their interests for the trade union movement to be incorporated into the state (Boraman 2012).

The growing militancy and increase in strike activity in New Zealand challenges narratives about the 1970s as an era of retreat. The period from 1968 to 1984 is often referred to as the long 1970s by New Zealanders because of the industrial turmoil that took place during this time (Boraman 2016). In this period, hundreds of thousands of workers participated in industrial action, and it was the highest level of industrial action in New Zealand history. Ross Webb (2018) suggests part of the reason unions were able to mobilise so many was a growing militancy among a new

generation of working class people who were influenced by the New Left. These workers understood that unions needed to go against economism and link up with other struggles. It was this push that led to unions playing a role in the Bastion Point occupation, against the seizure of Māori land (Webb 2018). When police removed the occupiers, unionised workers in the freezing works in Wellington reportedly walked out in solidarity (Webb 2018).

The move beyond economism and a growing convergence between the Old and New Left is supported by new data which reveals a dramatic increase in non-industrial strikes during the long 1970s (Boraman 2016). These non-industrial strikes were political, with the target being the government rather than employers. The new data helps us create a more accurate picture of worker activity during the time, as previous numbers had substantially underestimated the level of industrial activity. These non-industrial strikes “were an expression of dissatisfaction with particular aspects of broader society in which workers live” (Boraman 2016, 65).

The most significant of these was the general strike of 1979, which was the first general strike in New Zealand’s history, organised after Prime Minister Robert Muldoon introduced the Remuneration Act 1979, a piece of legislation that would allow the government to prevent wage settlements. Muldoon then proceeded to intervene in a settlement between the Drivers’ Union and their employer. As a result, the Federation of Labour called a general strike. 300,000 workers took part in the general strike, and an extraordinary 46 percent of workers went on strike in 1979 overall. The government backed down in the face of this unprecedented industrial action and the Remuneration Act was repealed a year after (Boraman 2016).

While convergences between the Old and New Left partly reinvigorated the trade union movement in New Zealand. The new kind of working class agency that emerged from the Keynesian era energised and radicalised working class organisation. The new working class were not content to

accept the drudgery of repetitive and alienated labour and they dreamed of deepening democracy in the workplace and their communities (Fisher 2018). Their vision was not of class mobility, but of the abolition of class itself (Fisher 2018). They viewed class struggle beyond economism, seeing it converging and intertwining with struggles against racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression (Boraman 2012). In France, this new kind of worker alongside student radicals almost toppled the government. Perhaps, the middle-class elements of the New Left and the conservative economic elements of the Old Left prevented this convergence from reaching its full potential but that is certainly not the whole story. With this new kind of working class agency, it is easy to see the flickering of a conscious subject. This was the product of the unprecedented freedom and prosperity produced by social democracy, but also through the active process of engaging in class struggle and seeing the residue of popular power in everyday life. This new kind of working class agency is the antithesis to the capitalist subject of the culture industry. This demonstrates how the culture industry and the new tools of social control were unable to prevent consciousness and agency emerging through the cracks of capitalist realism.

### *Reflections on the Defeat of the Organised Working Class*

In many respects, the failures of electoral socialism and workers' parties, who were formed to act as the political expression of working class agency but had become beholden to capital through the historic compromise, are most significant in explaining the defeat of the workers' movement (Prezworski 1980). During the long 1970s, the New Zealand Labour party in particular, demonstrated that it was unfit for purpose, showing a lack of leadership and political imagination (Bodman 2013). This lack of political imagination is a continuing theme that comes up again and again regarding electoral socialism (Prezworski 1980; Fisher 2018), demonstrating how acutely this limits the horizons of possibility. Electoral socialists were not able to respond to the economic

crisis of the 1970s nor the increasingly radical demands of a new generation of workers who had risen above their station (Bodman 2013). Effectively, the working class had no political representation or expression, curbing the mass character of the 1970s radical turn.

This was the case with the New Zealand Labour party, which had transformed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century from a party for and of the working class to an unfit-for-purpose vehicle for a cadre class of professional politicians. Labour's transformation was evident in an increasingly strained relationship between the party and trade unions during the post-war era. The source of the tension between Labour and the trade unions was the party's pivot away from class-politics to a 'national' platform (Franks and McAloon 2016). The 1951 waterfront strike, at the time the largest strike in New Zealand's history, was a critical turning point in Labour's relationship with trade unions. Labour leader Walter Nash refused to publicly support the workers, saying "we are not for the waterside workers, and we are not against them" (Sinclair 1976, 752). This position displeased both sides of the dispute and Nash was rebuked as spineless and indecisive; it was widely seen as the reason Labour lost the 1951 election (Franks and McAloon 2016). In addition to spelling electoral defeat for Labour, it marked the divergence between the party and trade unions. Following this, the trade unions' influence within the party began to wane, and during the periods Labour was in government, there was markedly less and less consultation between unions and the government (Franks and McAloon 2016; Bodman 2013).

The pivot away from class politics was justified by 'electoral realities' as the manual working class vote did not constitute a numerical majority (Prezworski 1980). The defeat of the First Labour Government in 1949 after 14 years in office marked the beginning of a period of defeat and decline for the party. Labour would not return to government for another eight years and would not be in government for more than a single term until the 1980s (Franks and McAloon 2016). This period of defeat caused an existential crisis within Labour. Walter Nash, who was Labour leader from

1950 to 1963, and Arnold Nordmeyer, who preceded him, became preoccupied with modernising the party from a working class party to a party for 'all' (Franks and McAloon 2016). Nordmeyer in particular oversaw a 'new look' for Labour, believing that New Zealand was a classless or entirely middle-class society, and as a result, there was "no place today for what used to be known as class struggle" (Webber 1976, 85).

The modernisation of the party was ideological and structural with the aim of transforming Labour from a mass party to cadre party of professionals. This began with a consolidation of power within the PLP (Parliamentary Labour Party) and the dismantling of party democracy. For Webber (1976), it was this new oligarchical structure that made Labour's ideological transformation possible. The justification for these changes was that the working class membership did not reflect the average voter, and that their influence skewered Labour's policies and prevented electoral success. As was intended, this transformation resulted in a mass exodus of members. Interestingly, this occurred while the pro-capital right-wing National party's membership was ballooning. By 1975, the National Party had 170,000 members, 12 times the number of members Labour had (Webber 1976).

Labour's transformation meant that it came to be a party dominated by the professional class rather than the working class. Norman Kirk's ascendance to Labour leader in 1965 marked what appeared to be a reversal of this trend. Kirk, who was from a working class background and was supported by the unions in his leadership bid, briefly re-established consultation committees between the unions and Labour (Bodman 2013). Kirk was an enormously popular figure, seen as a humanitarian and a man of the people (Franks and McAloon 2016). Kirk led Labour to victory in the 1972 election with the help of union support, just as the economic crisis of the 1970s began to intensify. Once in power, despite his background and affiliation with trade unions, Kirk did little to substantially repair the relationship between Labour and the union movement (Bodman 2013).

He did not follow through on repealing anti-union laws enacted by the previous National government and he advocated against substantial wage increases for workers (Bodman 2013). In a period of high inflation, he effectively campaigned for working class New Zealanders to take a large pay cut. Then in 1973, Labour imposed another wage freeze further angering and alienating unions and their members (Bodman 2013).

As the economic crisis worsened, unions came under increasing coordinated attacks from the media, with the privately owned media ecosystem in New Zealand exhibiting a “structural bias” towards capital (Bodman 2013, 80). Bodman (2013) traces how media representation of unions pivoted from portraying them as the legitimate organisational arm of the working class to an extremist and fringe movement which threatened national interests and the health of the economy. This attempt to contrast the public interest with the interests of unions was the beginning of a prolonged and targeted delegitimisation campaign by capital, heralding the unravelling of the historic compromise that had characterised social democracy. Instead of supporting unions and resisting these narratives, Kirk reproduced it, stating in 1974 following widespread strike action in Auckland that “to put it mildly the public have had a gutsful, and so have we” (Bodman 2013, 79). This contrasting the actions of unions with the interest of the public often appealed to the ‘public’ by employing a consumerist framing (Bodman 2014, 79). Here, it is possible to observe the antagonisms between the new capitalist subject and the new worker. The consumer and the public are portrayed as separate from the working class and their interests as antithetical. One New Zealand Herald editorial at the time tellingly remarked that “the general public ... feels irritated and resentful at continual threats of being deprived of goods and services” (Bodman 2013, 89).

Thus, the growing militancy of the working class did not develop in a vacuum but was partly in response to increased attacks on them by agents of capital. The National Party’s 1975 election

campaign which saw them defeat the incumbent Labour government, was characterised by increased attacks on the legitimacy of the trade union movement (Bodman 2013). Trade unionist Helen Kelly described the National party as inciting a “climate of anti-union hysteria” (quoted in Gattey 2018), with television adverts during the campaign portraying trade unionists as “thugs” and organisations “who important class prejudice and industrial anarchy” (Bodman 2013, 32). The adverts also tellingly contrasted the interests of the union movement with the public, portraying unions as a threat to the nation. An excerpt from one such National Party advert entitled *Dancing Cossacks* stated that unions:

“Can close your business, take away your job or bring down our shaky economy and there’s nothing you or the Labour Government can do about it. Because the first thing the Labour Government did was to change the law to make these things ‘legal’. The first thing a new National Government is going to do is to make damned sure that you can do something about it.” (Bodman 2013, 32)

It is for this reason that Bodman (2013, 87) describes the 1970s as a paradoxical moment for the Left; it was characterised by both a growth in union strength and power but also increased political attacks and a lack of political representation, with many unionists describing Muldoon’s government and the corporate media as orchestrating a “hatred campaign” against them. The transformation of the Labour Party left the working class without political representation at a critical juncture. The Labour Party had accepted the inevitability of capitalism at a time when it was necessary to imagine an alternative. Mudge (2018) points out the economic crisis of the 1970s was mild in contrast to the Great Depression and the Great Recession. The response to the crisis was political, undoubtedly a pretext for capital to re-establish dominance and restore profitability by destroying the bargaining power of the organised working class (Harvey 2011; Mudge 2018). The outcome could have been different if the working class had effective political



expression and representation. Analysing the factors which led to the defeat of the Left during this period, I argue this appears to be the most significant one. The admitted limitations of the middle-class elements of the New Left and the economism of the Old Left did indeed play a role, but I would argue that this has been overstated. There is a lot of evidence which indicates convergences between the Old and New Left; the crucial missing element was political expression to give these struggles a mass character. The early Old Left saw electoral politics as a strategy to gain mass character and expression. In the 1970s in New Zealand, it was precisely this that was missing, and the culture industry was thus able to run a one-sided campaign aimed at discrediting and delegitimising the workers' movement (Bodman 2013).

The Keynesian era saw the rise of the culture industry and a new capitalist subject. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) were pessimistic about the potential for working class agency as a result of these advancements. This pessimism was justifiable, but history demonstrates the resilience and potential of working class agency despite this. The working class was concurrently socialised through working class organisations and class struggle, which functioned as secular churches, as well as the freedom and opportunities afforded to them by social democracy (Fisher 2018). As a result, alongside this new capitalist subject, a new and radical working class agency also developed. These were workers who had risen above their station and dreamed of a new world beyond capitalism. They viewed class struggle beyond simple economic frameworks, understanding the importance of struggling on all social terrains (Windham 2017).

The coming of age of a new generation of workers and the convergences between the Old and New Left created a renewed political imagination among the working class who began to conceive of a "social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude" (Willis 1980, 63). This demonstrates how deterministic renderings of history fail to understand the possibilities and potential that emerged despite the movement's eventual defeat. The interregnum between social

democracy and neoliberalism was defined by class struggle and antagonisms between the new capitalist subject and a new working class subject. Rescuing this history is vital towards giving us insights into the social evils we have yet to cure.

## Chapter 3: The Hard and Hollow Moment

The central legacy of the neoliberal project lies in the destruction of the organised working class. As a result, despite multiple systematic crises, neoliberalism has been able to endure. In this chapter, I build on Brown's (2019) notion of neoliberalism as a retreat of democracy and an attack on the sovereignty of the people. I demonstrate that the history of neoliberalism in New Zealand reflects this anti-democratic impulse, showing how neoliberalism arrived in New Zealand by way of a "bureaucratic coup" (Jesson 1987, 42). Neoliberalism's hostility to democracy is not evident only in its creation but also in the type of society it creates. I, therefore, follow this history of neoliberalism by analysing the "hard and hollow" society neoliberalism creates (Bickerton 2013, 70).

This hard and hollowness refer to the hardness of the neoliberal state, where power is increasingly concentrated within the executive and beholden to international capital and global governance structures, while also insulated from public pressure. In addition, it describes the hollow nature of technocratic governance which "suggest certain realms of decision making are technical exercises with no feasible alternatives" (Bickerton 2013, 70). The hollowness and hardness of the state reflect a transformed relationship with society. The state no longer acts as a direct representative but begins to behave as a "responsible and better-informed guardian" (Bickerton 2013, 70). The hollowness is a consequence of this transformed relationship between the state and society, with the decline and retreat of mediating links between the state and society, creating a "general alienation of the political class from core social constituencies" (Bickerton 2013, 71).

The public experiences this hollowness as a disenfranchisement from political decision-making. James Heartfield (2012) describes the hard and hollow nature of the neoliberal era as a by-product of its goal to defeat the working class challenge of the 1970s:

The elite tore up the old institutions that bound the masses to the state. Class conflict was institutionalized under the old system, which not only contained working class opposition but also helped the ruling class to formulate a common outlook. What started as an offensive against working class solidarity [...] undermined the institutions that bound society together.

It is was this defeat and the disappearance of the old institutions that bound people to the state that has allowed zombie neoliberalism to endure. I conclude the chapter by demonstrating that the hard and hollow society created by neoliberalism will not be undone by crisis. The Great Recession and now the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated this. Any hope for an alternative rest on the emergence of a collective agent able to challenge capital.

### *A Kiwi Coup*

Neoliberalism arrived on New Zealand's shores suddenly and without warning. The economic crises of the 1970's had left the country in a state of economic duress. In the 1984 election, in which the Labour Party emerged victorious on a progressive platform, voters gave Labour a mandate to strengthen New Zealand's fledgling social democracy (Neilson 2016). The trade union movement, battered from Muldoon and capital's hatred campaign had thrown its weight behind the Labour Party out of desperation, under the impression it was the lesser of two evils (Bodman 2013). The paradoxical nature of the 1970s had left the movement with historical levels of industrial strength yet without a political expression to give it mass character. It is largely as a

result of this, that the organised working class was caught off guard by the trajectory taken by the Fourth Labour government and was in no position to resist what was to come.

Labour leader and later Prime Minister David Lange was someone who entered politics to advocate for the poor and downtrodden (Jesson 2005). Despite this, under Lange's tenure, the fourth Labour government would undertake to revolutionise the New Zealand economy to allow for the biggest upward accumulation of wealth since the colonial era (Jesson 2005). This aim of this neoliberal revolution was to centralise wealth and power in the hands of the capitalist class. David Harvey (2004, 63-87) refers to this process as "accumulation by dispossession", describing how capital accumulates wealth by the enclosure of publicly owned resources. For Harvey (2004, 17), this occurs through privatisation, financialisation, the management and manipulation crisis and upward redistribution of wealth to the capitalist class by the state. This is precisely what transpired in New Zealand, despite the fact that the Fourth Labour government was elected on a platform which promised to do the opposite (Neilson 2016).

Neoliberalism was not born in New Zealand. It had first been trialled at a national scale in Chile following the coup d'état and installation of Pinochet's military dictatorship (Klein 2007). Its 'successful' implementation there was followed by its introduction in the United States and the United Kingdom after successive victories for the New Right (a term used to refer to proponents of neoliberalism) in both countries (Klein 2007). In contrast to the United Kingdom and the United States, neoliberalism in New Zealand was implemented not by political representatives of the New Right or capital but by the Labour Party (Jesson 1992).

What was also notable about the introduction of neoliberalism in New Zealand was the rapid pace of transformation, the lack of democratic mandate and the radical changes made. This is especially true when compared to neoliberalism in Australia, which was also implemented by a

Labour government (Humphrys 2018). Australia's neoliberal transformation was a moderate and slower one, something that has been attributed to the institutional strength of the trade union movement and its ongoing relationship and embeddedness within the Australian Labour Party (Harré 2005). This demonstrates the significance and extent of the alienated relation of representation between the New Zealand Labour Party and the trade union movement. Consequently, Australia today retains elements of the welfare state and labour regulation, whereas in New Zealand the welfare state and the institutional power of the trade union movement were more comprehensively dismantled (Harré 2005). As a result, New Zealand now has one of the most deregulated economies in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), with the World Bank consistently rating it as one of the easiest places in the world to do business, citing this lack of regulations (Ang 2017).

How did New Zealand transform so quickly and so radically? The answer, for Bruce Jesson (Jesson 1987), is that neoliberalism was implemented through a bureaucratic coup. The use of the term coup here is useful to describe the manner in which New Zealand democracy was undermined and power was seized by a small elite cadre, reflecting the anti-democratic and authoritarian impulse of neoliberalism. Jesson (1999) notes how the New Right almost overnight went from an extremist to hegemonic.

Prior to 1984, proponents of neoliberalism were a small minority of elite businessmen, politicians and top-level bureaucrats. The ideology enjoyed little popular support. This is seen in the electoral performance of real estate developer and high-profile New Right figure Bob Jones's New Zealand Party. The party, founded to contest the 1984 election and advocate for neoliberal reforms, enjoyed very little support from the wider public (Jesson 1999). Absurdly, these very same unpopular reforms were implemented soon afterwards by the Labour Party. This demonstrates the profoundly anti-democratic nature of the neoliberal project in New Zealand.

Indeed, the introduction of neoliberalism stemmed from a concerted exploitation of the economic crisis of the 1970s, rather than any democratic mandate. This crisis, coupled with what Jesson (1999, 31) terms Prime Minister David Lange's "economic illiteracy", and Labour's lack of in-depth economic policy, became a pretext for adherents of neoliberalism to seize control. Jesson argues that this bureaucratic coup was possible due to a lack of intellectual immaturity and political imagination on the part of the Labour Party. This left the Fourth Labour government completely open to capture by proponents of the New Right.

Minister of Finance, Roger Douglas, became the leader of this coup, providing the political will necessary for these changes to occur. Jesson (1987, 113) describes this bureaucratic coup occurring via the capture of cabinet and government departments through the Treasury, which presented so-called "dispassionate economic analysis" in a series of briefing papers to the incoming government. It is these documents which Jesson argues were the basis for the neoliberal revolution. The briefing papers argued for a radical overhaul of the New Zealand economy, an effective dismantling of social democracy with the aim to "end government interference wherever it encountered it", couched in dispassionate and mundane analysis (Jesson 1987, 122). Here, we can observe how neoliberalism aims to marginalise the political to the logic of the market, presenting political questions as purely economic, pre-decided and outside the scope of public debate and democratic choice.

The briefing papers treated all areas of society as "belonging to the economy" and economic orthodoxy as beyond debate (Jesson 1987, 122). As a result, politics becomes apolitical, a matter of simply managing the status quo rather than transforming it. Some of these influential documents remained unpublished as Douglas claimed it would have "highlighted the differences between government and treasury" and presented the opposition with an opportunity to "drive

wedges between them” (Barton 1989, 45). This historical record adds credence to Jesson’s (1987) charge that neoliberalism arrived in New Zealand by way of a bureaucratic coup. Douglas’s intent was to implement change as fast as possible, determined to carry out a revolution within a single parliamentary term (Matthews 2017). Douglas, according Matthews (2017), had an urgency about him. He was acutely aware that these policies did not have a democratic mandate and that, outside of the parliamentary term, he may not get a second chance. Douglas also took steps to appoint ideological allies in key positions of power, creating a network of neoliberal partisans to ensure the endurance of this revolution (Jesson 1999). The radical program Douglas and Treasury carried out was centred around 7 major priorities (Barton 1989):

1. Creating a profit-making state.
2. Combating inflation.
3. Opening the economy to international capital.
4. Reducing taxes.
5. Funding cuts to public services.
6. Removing industrial and workplace protections; and
7. Deregulating the economy.

These priorities aimed to apply the logic of the market to governance, allowing capital freedom of movement, shrinking the public sector to lessen the tax burden on the wealthy and removing regulations and protections of work to maximize profit (Barton 1989). The intent and result of this program was an upward redistribution of wealth from the working class to the capitalist class and the imposition of the logic of the market on all facets of social and political life (Brown 2009).

What is truly remarkable is the relative ease with which this radical transformation occurred. As noted above, in Australia, the strength of the trade union movement and its embeddedness within



the Labour Party seemed to moderate the neoliberal turn compared to the radical transformation seen in New Zealand. Bruce Jesson (1992; 1999) explains the lack of resistance to the anti-intellectualism of the New Zealand Left, who did not seem to recognise the threat these changes posed. While this is a structural weakness of the New Zealand Left, I would argue that the most significant factor was the alienated relationship of representation between Labour and the trade union movement. Despite the radical and militant turn of the 1970s, this meant the Left had no political expression to give it mass character. After political attacks of the Muldoon era, the organised working class turned to the Labour Party as the lesser of two evils, working to help get them into government (Bodman 2013). Thus, when Labour betrayed this support, they were caught off guard and unable to mount an effective resistance (Bodman 2013).

At the same time, neoliberal revolutions were underway in the United Kingdom and the United States. It is hard not to also connect New Zealand's colonial condition as another factor which drove this acquiescence (Jesson 1992). Historically, New Zealand has struggled to set an independent political and economic course. The great social experiments that have seen the construction of the welfare state and social democracy occurred amidst a larger global sea of change and a growing Keynesian hegemony.

As Jesson (1992) points out, due to the early incorporation of the union movement into the state, social democracy did not emerge out of protracted industrial struggle as in other countries. It emerged from a largely political struggle, which reflected political developments elsewhere in the United Kingdom and Europe. New Zealand's hollow society and culture of anti-intellectualism means it remains in a state of 'dependence' with the rest of the Global North, unable to imagine an independent political or economic trajectory. The new kind of working class agency and counterculture dreaming which emerged during the Keynesian era had begun to develop a political imagination which challenged this colonial condition and sought to fill New Zealand's

hollow society. The absence of political expression to give these imaginings a mass character stymied the potential of this. The neoliberal revolution in New Zealand was facilitated by the weakness and limitations of the Labour Party. Its initial abandonment of the final goal of socialism, and the substitution of Keynesianism, eventually led to the betrayal of its purpose to give the working class movement. The culmination of this was the economic illiteracy of Prime Minister David Lange and the bureaucratic coup that occurred despite the Fourth Labour government's democratic mandate to strengthen New Zealand's social democracy.

The neoliberal revolution resulted in an eruption of greed and avarice amongst the New Zealand capitalist class (Jesson 1988). The business atmosphere was described as a "squalid scramble" by people who had "seemed to lose all common sense" (Jesson 1988, 11). This was particularly the case with finance, insurance and real estate capital, who were unrestrained by any restrictions or regulations and would come to dominate the new economic order. Ongley (2016, 89) observes the neoliberal revolution had the opposite effect within the productive sector, where "manufacturers lost most of their import protections and export incentives". This, in conjunction with increasing interest rates and contracting domestic markets, resulted in "farm sales, business closures and redundancies" (Ongley 2016, 89). The huge profits to be made in the Finance, Insurance and Real Estate (FIRE) industries saw investment divert from productive sectors of the economy to FIRE industries (Kelsey 2015). This enriched asset owners but did little to stimulate employment or production. Christine Berry (2020) argues that the re-orientation of the economy towards the interest of the capitalist class created a rentier economy.

Within the rentier economy, wealth is accumulated primarily through dispossession and the extraction of rent rather than production. Needless to say, the re-orientation of the New Zealand state to facilitate the accumulation of wealth through dispossession – the extraction of rent – enriched the capitalist class enormously. The dominance of the rentier economy, a tax system

which placed most of the tax burden on income earners while leaving capital gains untouched, created New Zealand as “a billionaire’s playground” (Gibson 2012). This is evident in the fact that New Zealand was mentioned in the infamous Panama Papers as a tax haven for international capital, with our trust system able to be used to escape tax responsibility in other jurisdictions (Chenoweth 2016). It should come as no surprise, then, that wealth in New Zealand is taxed sparingly compared to other jurisdictions. State revenue is primarily acquired through income tax, though even high income earners in New Zealand pay less tax than in comparable jurisdictions. New Zealand remains an outlier with wealth, capital gains and inheritance going largely untaxed (Rashbrooke 2015).

New Zealand’s failure to tax capital gains is one factor which has “distorted incentives and encouraged over-investment in property” (Rashbrooke 2015, 20). Property is now New Zealand’s largest industry, contributing 13 percent of New Zealand’s GDP (Miller 2017). This is because real estate in New Zealand is a rare investment category where one can generate a return that is not only guaranteed but also untaxed (Rashbrooke 2015). Low-interest rates, depleting state housing stock, a lack of capital gains tax and rampant speculation have fuelled the property market and runaway housing prices, creating enormous wealth for homeowners and real estate investors in the process (Hickey 2020). This hyper-commodification of housing has meant that, for many, home ownership is no longer accessible or achievable (Hickey 2020). A growing number (34 percent) of New Zealanders now rent the country's substandard housing stock, with home ownership at lowest rate since the 1950s (Statistics New Zealand 2020). There are few protections or rights available to renters creating housing precarity and insecurity, which the government has admitted “can reinforce social exclusion and poverty” (Statistics New Zealand 2020, 27).

Tracking wealth in New Zealand is difficult due to the opaque nature of the financial system (Rashbrooke 2015). We can estimate that the richest 1 percent are worth more than 70 times the average New Zealander (Rashbrooke 2019). One useful metric is the National Business Review's (NBR) Rich List which, over the past 30 years, has published an annual list of the wealthiest individuals in New Zealand. These are helpful data to illustrate the explosion of wealth at the very top of society. Max Rashbrooke (2015) points out that these surveys are not perfectly accurate as the NBR can only estimate wealth held in private companies. It is also difficult to know how much wealth is held in assets overseas (Rashbrooke 2015). Still, it is one useful indicator of how wealth has been redistributed upwards. Rashbrooke (2015, 49) states "in the time that the Rich List has been running, the wealth of those surveyed once adjusted for inflation has risen from \$12.6 billion to \$57.4 billion. If non-residents are included, the figure rises to \$71.3 billion".

Something often forgotten is just how much of the enormous wealth generated during the neoliberal revolution came from the sales of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) to private individuals at prices below their valuation (Jesson 1999). This is how New Zealand's richest person, Graeme Hart, made his fortune. Hart, who is often portrayed as a self-made former truck driver who worked his way up to the top, actually acquired his fortune in 1990 when he purchased the Government Printing Office for far less than its capital value (Nippert 2015). The government even permitted Hart to pay for it out of earnings (Nippert 2015). This brazen theft of wealth from the public to the capitalist class shows the embedded corruption of privatisation schemes.

Douglas' dream of creating a profit-making state seems also to have been realised (Barton 1989). Given all this, it is no wonder that New Zealand is an attractive location for billionaires, some of whom have even set up bunkers here to flee to in the event of political, ecological or economic instability elsewhere (O'Connell 2018). Of course, the forces that have made some people rich are the same forces that make so many poor. Pew Research's (2018) *Global Survey of Economic*

*Attitudes* showed that a majority of people living in OECD countries believe that their children will be worse off financially than them. While New Zealand is not included, our closest neighbour Australia records that two in three Australian adults believe their children will be 'worse off' than them.

This pessimism in the future is well founded in the precarity of the present. The neoliberal revolution has led to the decline of working class wealth across the Global North and this resulted in social, political and economic instability. New Zealand is no outlier to these trends. Previously, it had been one of the most equal societies in the Global North during the post-war period. However, it experienced the sharpest increase in inequality in the developed world between the mid-1980's and the late 1990's (Rashbrooke 2019). As a result, New Zealand is now one of the more unequal countries in the OECD ranked at 22nd out of 34 OECD countries (Rashbrooke 2019). Rashbrooke (2019) notes that the income of the bottom 10 percent of earners has shown very little movement increasing from \$11,600 in 1986 to \$11,900 in 2018. This indicates that 30 years of economic growth has "by-passed one-tenth of the population" (Rashbrooke 2019).

The negative social outcomes that correlate with the ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor have been well documented by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2011) in *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*. In the book, they observe how societies with high levels of inequalities record lower life expectancy, declining rates of literacy and numeracy, increased levels of mental illness and addiction issues, a decline in social trust, social immobility and increased rates of imprisonment (Wilkinson and Pickett 2011). All these trends can be observed in New Zealand (Rashbrooke 2015). The empirical research cited here by Rashbrooke (2015; 2019) and Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) on what is termed the crisis of inequality and the negative social outcomes associated with it is useful. This scholarship demonstrates how the neoliberalisation of New Zealand has resulted in a transfer of wealth from

working class people and communities to the owning class. This evidence supports Harvey's (2011) thesis that neoliberalism was a political project to re-assert capital's power and dominance. That said, there is a lack of class analysis in these discussions around inequality that inhibits an understanding of the social and economic relations which create vast social inequities. The literature on inequality often does not capture the mutually constitutive relationship between labour and capital, that capital is created through the expropriation of value created through labour (Marx 1992). 'Inequality' is treated as a policy issue and removed from the embedded political and economic context.

### *Zombie Neoliberalism*

Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable. (Friedman 2002, 14)

Despite the obvious failures of neoliberalism and the crises it has engendered, it remains "dead but still dominant" (Davies 2016, 123). This is what Mark Fisher (2013) termed zombie neoliberalism remarking that "it is sometimes harder to kill a zombie than a living person". Davies (2016, 123), building on this, remarks that "neoliberalism has entered some sort of post-hegemonic phase in which systems and routines of power survive, but without normative and democratic authority". Davies (2016, 121) describes this post-hegemonic phase as "irrationalism from above" wherein a failed economic system persists, impervious to "evidence, evaluation or the merits of alternatives". An example of this is former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis'

description of his meetings with the European Union regarding Greece's debt. Varoufakis had gone to present an alternative to austerity and recalled officials' reaction to this:

It's not that it didn't go down well — it's that there was point-blank refusal to engage in economic arguments. Point blank... You put forward an argument that you've really worked on — to make sure it's logically coherent — and you're just faced with blank stares. It is as if you haven't spoken. What you say is independent of what they say. You might as well have sung the Swedish national anthem — you'd have got the same reply. (Varoufakis quoted in Lambert 2015)

Varoufakis's surreal account of his interactions with European Union officials, who could not imagine or hear of not imposing austerity on the beleaguered Greek people, demonstrates for Davies (2016) how this new post-hegemonic phase of neoliberalism persists through an ethos of punitiveness and punishment. This is best seen in the punishing nature of austerity itself. As a response to the Great Recession, austerity was a recovery plan which aimed to restore economic order through brutal decreases in government spending to pay off national debt. Austerity was enthusiastically adopted by European and British political leaders, despite scant evidence from history that such programs have ever worked to restore macroeconomic growth (Davies 2016). Regardless of the irrationalism of such a response, the structural violence of this post-hegemonic does serve a purpose, "as a strategy for the circumvention of crisis and, at the same, an avoidance of critique" (Davies 2016, 132). I would argue that right-wing populism and resentment-driven politics across the Global North is an extension of this same ethos of punishment. Right-wing populism therefore is not a break with neoliberalism; rather, it reflects its post-hegemonic status.

Davies (2016), Fisher (2013) and Møller Stahl (2019) use different terminology to describe this period but describe the same crisis. For Davies, it is post-hegemonic neoliberalism, while Fisher describes it as zombie neoliberalism. Møller Stahl (2019) circles back to Gramsci, characterising this moment as an interregnum. Despite their differences, all three come to the same troubling conclusion: despite the crisis, there remains no alternative. How can we account for this? Møller Stahl (2019) emphasises the importance of working class agency. Crisis does not mean an alternative will inevitably emerge. Friedman (2002, 14) himself was acutely aware of this, arguing that actions during crisis “depend on the ideas lying around”. He believed the goal for him and his fellow neoliberal intellectuals was to “develop alternatives and keep them alive and available” (Friedman 2002, 14).

The defeat of the working class movement and working class agency, following the interregnum of the 1960s and 70s, set us on a bleak trajectory. The immensity and magnitude of the loss of the future-that-could-have-been haunts the present. Neoliberalism signified a victory for the self-destructive forces of capitalism and a regression into barbarism. The collapse of the Left heralded a short-lived neoliberal triumphalism. We had arrived at the end of history. There was no alternative to capitalism.

In the aftermath of the Great Recession in 2008, the cracks in capitalism have begun to show and we are, once again, in a period of interregnum. In some ways, this period marks the end of the end of history. The Great Recession was triggered by the collapse of the housing market in the United States. A real estate bubble, which for years had been inflated by subprime mortgages, burst suddenly when housing prices showed a small decline, causing mortgage delinquencies and foreclosures (Tooze 2018). This had a cascading effect, leading to the collapse of the financial system. Due to the unprecedented economic integration of ‘advanced’ economies, a consequence of globalisation, the crash severely impacted the entire Global North (Tooze 2018).



New Zealand and Australia, however, were spared the worst of it via their trade relationship with China (Easton 2020). China, in response to the economic downturn and the global decline in demand for 'made in China' products, began a series of large-scale infrastructure projects to boost its economy (Easton 2020). For Davies (2016), as mentioned, the Great Recession resulted in the loss of neoliberalism's legitimacy, but there remained no collective agent to present an alternative, and as a result it entered into a post-hegemonic phase. This post-hegemonic phase of neoliberalism is hugely significant when considering the political and social terrain in which a contemporary class politics might operate. In the following section, I will argue that the post-hegemonic phase of neoliberalism has been characterised by acceleration, political inertia and a social void.

I characterise our contemporary interregnum as accelerating, referring to the increasing compression of time and space. Marx (2005) saw the compression of time and space as a consequence of capitalism's growth imperative, which creates the need to constantly accelerate the circulation of capital. Wajcman (2015, 17) describes this logic as "the faster money can be turned into the production of goods and services, the greater the power of capital to expand itself". The time-space compression has always been a feature of capitalism. However, it has become more pronounced in this post-hegemonic era. This is a result of the digital revolution and the proliferation of digital computing and communication technology (Wajcman 2015). These technological developments have facilitated rapid communication across the globe, significantly contributing to time-space compression (Wajcman 2015, 13-37). Within this time-space compression, the contradictions and antagonisms within capitalism become more pronounced, hence the emphasis on acceleration. The Great Recession did not mark the end of neoliberalism. Instead, it marked the acceleration of capital's accumulation by dispossession. The mechanism which was allowed this acceleration in capital accumulation is the digital economy (Wajcman

2015). These trends were observable prior to the Great Recession but accelerated in response to it, in an attempt to outrun capitalist crisis.

Marx and Engels (2014) argued that capital's need to constantly revolutionise production to escape its internal contradictions and antagonisms would, in turn, revolutionise relations of production. This is certainly evident in the aftermath of 2008, which has seen a sea change in the character of neoliberal capitalism. For Marx, one aspect of capitalism's growth imperative is the need to externalise and outrun the inherent contradictions within the system. The capitalist class is compelled to "nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere" (Marx 2014, 2). Post-2008, the new frontier of capitalism is the digital world. The internet prior to Web 2.0<sup>1</sup> was anarchic, decentralised and uncensored (Barbrook 1996). The technology was being used in ways that undermined the traditional media industry, as it had made the pirating of programs and media easier than ever. This caused many to speculate on the emancipatory and democratic potential of the internet, through its undercutting of intellectual property law (Barbrook 1996). This speculation has been proven to be idealistic. In reality, Web 2.0 represented capital's colonisation of this digital Wild West, as well as the monopolisation and commercialisation of digital infrastructure by capital (Zuboff 2019).

The development of tech monopolies, or Big Tech, constituted a market-led coup from above (Zuboff 2019). Big Tech created the capacity for capital to further encroach and enclose the social world. This capacity is often referred to as 'disruption' and 'innovation' by technology companies, code for further accumulation by dispossession (Zuboff 2019). I focus the acceleration of these trends in the wake of the Great Recession because of how it has entrenched the rentier economy,

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<sup>1</sup> Web 2.0 refers to the proliferation of social media networks and e-commerce (Zuboff 2019)

the privatisation of the remaining commons, as well the fragmentation and casualisation of work (Zuboff 2019). This has not happened via the state or legislation but parallel to them, undermining existing regulations and legislation without democratic mandate (Zuboff 2019). The dominance of Big Tech has allowed the sector to circumvent regulations with little push-back or resistance from a captured state. This has created a sense of inevitability around these transformations, with Big Tech framing them as the natural consequence of technological innovation.

Rideshare companies like Uber and digital rental marketplaces such as Airbnb have been framed as innovators and disruptors of their respective traditional industries (Zuboff 2019). In reality, this 'disruption' is symptomatic of a further round of capital accumulation by dispossession and exploitation. In Uber's case, this means labelling their workers as "contractors" which casualises the employment relationship and off-sets risks and costs onto their workforce (Ongweso Jr 2020). Airbnb further encloses and commodifies housing stock, resulting in an artificially inflated real estate market (Sherwood 2019).

Zuboff (2019) expertly demonstrates why it is useful to view Big Tech as an advancement in technologies of expropriation and accumulation. Zuboff (2019, 19) argues that the principal target of Big Tech's technologies of expropriation and accumulation is "private human experience"; with "so little left that could be commodified", this remains the "last virgin territory". It is for this reason that she describes Big Tech as the "new frontier of capitalism" (Zuboff 2019, 3). The principal aim is not just to predict human behaviour but modify and tune it towards profitable outcomes. Zuboff (2019) describes this goal of automating and instrumentalising human behaviour towards capital's interests as an assault of human autonomy and symptomatic of a "new species of power" which she refers to as "instrumentarianism". This new frontier of capitalism also profits through either circumventing labour laws to extract maximum value from workers or reinventing public services

in private form, thereby privatising what is left of the public sphere. Ironically, these initiatives are often branded as the new 'sharing economy' (Frenken and Shor 2019).

This so-called sharing economy is, in fact, an acceleration of the rentier economy, This is something that even a report published by the World Economic Forum has now acknowledged, predicting that, by 2030, most people will "own nothing" but rather "rent it" (Hannah 2017). Big Tech employs the rhetorical device of labelling many of their workers as "independent contractors", thereby offsetting all costs and risk onto workers (Cornelissen and Cholakova 2019). This has led Marazzi (2015, 42) to argue that work is "increasingly characterised by the fragmentation of the subjects constituted in the world of employment and non-employment". This, he argues, has implications for working class agency, with workers' ability to organise.

The acceleration following the Great Recession has been a quantitative rather than qualitative change, with pre-existing trends intensifying rather than transforming. This acceleration has occurred in and parallel to an intense and immobilising political inertia, with governments languishing in the face of capture by capital and democratic crisis. Davies (2016) characterises the political response to crisis as reflecting an ethos of punishment. I argue that another feature of politics in this interregnum is inertia. This inertia, a result of the wholesale capture of politics by capital is evident in the clinging to a post-political consensus despite endemic economic and democratic crises which require a political response. Post-politics describes the evacuation of the political from politics, with the disappearance of genuine contestation and conflicting claims (Mouffe 2005). In the era of neoliberal triumphalism, post-politics, it was charged, was merely reflective of an increasingly post-political citizenry (Mouffe 2005). However, in the aftermath of the Great Recession and widespread public disaffection with the status quo, post-politics has become a transparently elite, anti-democratic example of political inertia. The elitism of post-politics is transparent in the central role of expertise and technocratic knowledge within the post-political

paradigm. Jutel (2020, 429) notes that “the existence of social problems does not indicate irreducible class and political conflict but simply the fact that the intellectual resources of the technocratic class have yet to be deployed”. Post-politics attempts to overcome crisis and inertia through ‘techno-solutionism’ which promises to out-run yet only accelerates crisis, while exacerbating political inertia by offering a false solution (Jutel 2020).

The Obama presidency is an illustrative case study of the post-political inertia characteristic of the current interregnum. Obama was elected in 2008 at a critical juncture in the United States. Following the onset of the Great Recession, Obama campaigned on a platform of hope and change. His campaign rhetoric was reflective of a positive populism, capturing a real desire among Americans for change (Zuboff 2008). Zuboff (2008) describes how the Obama campaign unleashed “the power of a new populism” in American politics. This populism was a bottom-up populism rather than a top-down populism, with Obama’s soaring rhetoric stressing the importance of the masses in making change, evident in the slogan ‘YES WE CAN’ (Zuboff 2008).

In one speech delivered during the Democratic primary, Obama memorably quoted June Jordan’s, (1978) *Poem for South African Women*, rallying to the people that “we are the ones we have been waiting for”. Obama’s soaring rhetoric about change occurred alongside a developing relationship with Big Tech, with Google Chief Executive Eric Schmidt playing a leading role in his campaign (Zuboff 2019). This was because Big Tech’s promise to instrumentalise and commodify human behaviour and nature, it was theorised, could also help candidates win elections. The Obama campaign was enthusiastic to utilise data and social media to their advantage. In this sense, the campaign was the first truly digital campaign, and many credited this with giving him a competitive advantage over competitors (Zuboff 2019).

Obama's campaign infrastructure seemed to reflect both his populist ethos and his intimate relationship with Big Tech. The campaign made use of data and digital infrastructure to set up a distributed organising model, hiring grassroots campaigners to lead an army of volunteers to mobilise voters. It also reflected an embedded techno-solutionism, using digital tools to collect behavioural and relational data on 250 million voters to facilitate 'predictive modelling' on voting behaviour. An aide was recorded as saying "we knew who... people were going to vote for before they decided" (Zuboff 2019, 150). This was the beginning of digital technologies being used not simply to facilitate democracy but to predict, instrumentalise and modify voter behaviour.

Obama's populist rhetoric and his campaign, described at the time as a "grassroots machine of two million supporters", captured the public's imagination and mood, catapulting Obama to the White House with a mandate to transform America in the interests of the working people who had rallied to vote for change (Sifry 2017). The Obama campaign had built an impressive grassroots organisation, something which Obama himself was acutely aware of, describing it "as the best political organisation in America and probably the best political organisation that we've seen in the last 30 to 40 years" (Sifry 2017). Many within the Obama campaign recognised the potential for this organisation to live on beyond the election (Berman 2011). This infrastructure could help to rebuild a civic working class life that had been uprooted by neoliberalism. There was recognition among some within the campaign that in order to achieve progressive change and address democratic disengagement and decline, there was an urgent need to rebuild collective agency in working class communities and connect them to the political realm.

Marshall Ganz, a senior advisor to the Obama campaign and former trade unionist, has stated that while Obama had harnessed the energy and dreams of his army of volunteers, he was fearful of it at the same time. Ganz describes how Obama viewed his own grassroots organisation "like a tiger you can't control" (quoted in Berman 2011). As a result, the campaign infrastructure was

dismantled within a year of Obama's election victory. The incoming Obama administration and cabinet was also full of establishment and corporate-aligned figures, reflecting that Obama had no intention of realising the people-powered hope and change he spoke of during the campaign. Meanwhile, Obama's relationship with Big Tech, particularly Google, continued, with Eric Schmidt serving on the transition team and leading fundraising and voter turnout for Obama's 2012 re-election campaign (Zuboff 2019). Google would attend White House meetings more than once a week on average during Obama's tenure, and there was a lot of crossover between White House staff and Google (Zuboff 2019). No other company seemed to have this degree of overlap or intimacy with the administration. Easton and Lynn (2009) of *Fortune* magazine described how the Obama administration relied on Google executives for economic and technological advice.

Obama's 2008 victory occurred at a critical juncture in American politics following the Great Recession. The nature of the crisis and its roots in the predatory nature of finance capitalism had left millions disenchanted and angry with the neoliberal status quo (Cooper 2019). It was a want of an alternative that led millions to vote for Obama and his message of hope and change (Cooper 2019). What Obama ultimately functioned as was a bait and switch, harnessing these popular dreams for electoral purposes without any real intention of realising their popular demands. Once in office, the Obama administration reverted back to a post-political type, refusing to break with neoliberal economic orthodoxy despite its clear failure (Cooper 2019). Notwithstanding the historic opportunity and mandate to fulfil a vision of progressive change, the administration opted to bail out the very financial system, which had imperilled the economy. At the same time, they failed to provide government support to the millions of working class Americans who had lost their homes and jobs (Cooper 2019). In addition to this, they rejected calls to hold the financial elites responsible for the crisis accountable (Cooper 2019). This was not the result of malice, but rather the same political inertia and commitment to prevailing economic orthodoxy that hamstrung the Second Labour government in the United Kingdom in the 1930's.

Obama (2020, 808), in his recent autobiography *A Promised Land*, defends his administration's response to the Great Recession, writing that to do anything different "would have required a violence to the social order, a wrenching of political and economic norms". It is precisely this sentiment which makes Obama the perfect example of this interregnum's post-political inertia. Post-politics regards conflict or a contestation of claims as violent, rendering such a framework inherently unable to resolve capitalist crises. The danger of progressive post-political figures is the cynical incorporation of popular disillusionment and a dream of a better world put towards the goal of maintaining the status quo.

The Obama administration played a crucial role in fortifying the hegemony of Big Tech and its market coup from above (Zuboff 2019). His post-political tech-solutionism demonstrated an anti-democratic elite and their antagonistic relationship with the people, whose energy and discontent they needed to harness but also discipline. In hindsight, Obama's positive populist rhetoric shares stark similarities to the framing of the digital rentier economy as a sharing economy. For Jutel (2020, 42), this dystopian double-speak denotes how "rent-seeking corporations manage to stand in for deliberative democratic ideals and community empowerment". In the aftermath of the Great Recession, elites sought to avoid any challenge to the status quo by seeking to transform the people into subjects who own nothing *and* are happy about it.

This post-political attempt to escape economic and political crisis through tech-solutionism has demonstrably failed. It is for this reason that Jutel (2020) frames right-wing populism as a symptom of neoliberal post-hegemonic status and its inability to confront capitalist crisis. The Obama's administration's promise of hope and change, and subsequent refusal to address the material needs of Americans following the Great Recession, further delegitimised the political establishment and produced a backlash. During the course of Obama's tenure, the Democrats



“lost a tenth of the party’s senate seats, a fifth of house and state legislative seats and a third of its governorships” (Cooper 2016).

The organising infrastructure and grassroots power created by the Obama campaign, and its subsequent dismantling in the wake of his electoral victory, was illustrative of both the potential for working class agency and the potential for incorporation of this by the political establishment. The exploitative relationship between the people and post-political figures stokes a backlash politics. It also amplifies the social vacuum created by neoliberalism, a result of the absence of working class structures and organisation to express and give working class experiences collective meaning. 2008 represented a critical juncture and an opportunity for democratic renewal. Instead, political inertia meant accelerated and fortified Big Tech as the new frontier of capitalism.

Big Tech’s coup from above, and the further enclosure and retreat of the public sphere, has created an exponentially growing social void. This is not a novel phenomenon. Neoliberalism’s attack on the social is well established, with Thatcher’s famous quip that “there’s no such thing as society” often evoked as an example of this anti-social individualist ethos (Fisher 2012). In the aftermath of 2008, however, the social void produced by neoliberalism has become more pronounced. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2020) a report published annually, records a decline in trust in the state, business, mainstream media and non-governmental organisations in recent years. Declining levels of interpersonal trust were inversely correlated with increasing levels of wealth inequality (Graafland and Bjorn 2019). Unsurprisingly, in America, interpersonal trust has recently reached historic lows, with a survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre (2019) demonstrating that only 30.3 percent of Americans agreed that most people could be trusted. It follows that declining social trust is in part a product of austerity and its punitive ethos. This punitive ethos, alongside the vacuum left by the public sphere and the dismantling of working

class institutions, meant there was no countervailing force to realise collective working class agency and sustain it.

The ascendance of social media post-2008 replaced the ailing public sphere with the private sphere of social media platforms. These platforms are structured to commodify users and all social interaction. The ubiquity of social media and its pervasiveness are an advanced manifestation of the culture industry. The architecture of social media invites us not only to consume, but to become commodities ourselves. The anti-social effect of this occurs at an interpersonal level with social media use associated with increased levels of anxiety and depression (Woods and Scott 2016). It also occurs at a collective level. Users are segregated and siloed off according to demographics and political persuasion via algorithms (Zuboff 2019). Thought and opinion are pre-formed and treated as truth, but also removed from any points of difference. As Fong (2020) points out, this has made the authoritarian tendency of capitalism more pronounced, writing there is a “lack of patience for anything that doesn’t fit neat formulas”, a “constant amazement at just how evil *other* people can be” and all of this is evoked to “cover up a basic denial about the contradictions of capitalism”.

Digital communication technologies, rather than liberate us through automation, have been used to exacerbate time poverty. This is partly through encroachment of work on free time via these media, but also the addictive design and architecture of social media. This addictive architecture is driven by Big Tech’s relentless need to accumulate data, the principal currency of the digital economy. Tristan Harris, a former design ethicist at Google, refers to smartphones as “the slot machine in your pocket” (quoted in Seymour 2019). Harris compares social media to gambling in that the addictive properties of both are a result of “intermittent variable rewards”, which describes how rewards are uncertain and variable; you have to engage or pull the lever to see (quoted in Seymour 2019). Seymour (2019), links time poverty with this addictive architecture, noting that a

“sense of dropping out of time is common to many addictions”. Social media is designed to drop us out of ‘real life’ into an infinite digital dimension. This notion of dropping out time and its importance to keeping users hooked is seen in the infinite scroll, which loads content continuously as the user scrolls allowing for endless content.

The addictive properties, alongside the fragmentation and siloing off of discourse and communities, as well as the commodification of social interaction and users, have led Vaidhyathan (2018) to refer to digital communication platforms as “anti-social media”. Vaidhyathan (2018) takes this argument further, reflecting Adorno and Horkheimer’s view that the culture industry offers subjects a half education and blocks critical engagement and thought. For Vaidhyathan (2018), digital communication has created information pollution, whereby users are constantly overloaded with information which all wants to appear important and reliable. This is the basis of the digital business model where clicks equate to capital. It has created a levelled and polluted ‘information landscape’ where content has to stand out, leading to emotionally charged and divisive leads. Vaidhyathan (2018) therefore concludes social media is designed to make us *feel* rather than think.

The further retreat of working class organisations and accumulation of the public sphere by capital in the wake of the Great Recession alongside its replacement with anti-social media has resulted in a social void. The subjects of neoliberalism are distrusting, atomised and alienated. Rather than social solidarity, there is a pervasive sense of negative solidarity where deprived neoliberal subjects recoil from demands for social justice not out of avowed support for the status quo but rather a cynicism that there is no alternative. This feeds a pervasive sense of resentment at the thought of any group having any advantage or benefit that is not available to others as well as a sense of masochistic pleasure at the thought of someone suffering more or having less.

## *COVID-19: Widening the Cracks in Capitalism Realism*

The electoral defeat of Trump in 2020 perhaps allows us to move beyond the notion of right-wing populism as the cause rather than a symptom of crisis, without an alternative to neoliberal capitalism and looming technological dystopia, social and political instability will persist (Stiglitz 2021). Instead of then viewing Trumpism and right-wing populism as a break from neoliberal capitalism, it is more helpful to understand it as an extension of its ethos of punishment and individualism, as well as a reflection of the anti-democratic and authoritarian impulses latent within. While right-wing populism threatens post-political liberalism, liberalism has also “become libidinally dependent on the populist threat, negatively defining itself against the barbarians at the gate” (Jutel 2020, 42).

Liberal post-politics fetishes itself as being the politics of expertise, which is concerned with facts, reason and science, seen in how Joe Biden continually contrasted himself with Trump as the candidate who believes in science (Biden 2020). This appeal and fetishism of expertise, however, seems increasingly outmoded and ineffective. It misunderstands right-wing populism and post-truth politics. This is the argument that William Davies (2018) makes in his book *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World*. For Davies, contemporary politics is now defined by emotion rather than reason. He stipulates that ‘reason’ itself is in decline. Davies (2018) does not treat reason, truth or facts as abstractions removed from the social world. He understands that facts, reason and truth have a fundamentally social element and can only become true insofar as there is a consensus. What happens, however, when our shared consensus of reality itself becomes fractured, when facts “no longer provide us with a reality we all agree on” (Davies 2018, 14). The answer, it seems, is growing social polarisation, distrust and democratic decline (Davies 2018).

The electoral defeat of Trump will not reverse this phenomenon because right-wing populism is a symptom, and not the disease itself. This decline in trust is a rational and reasonable response to a society organised to facilitate the accumulation of capital at the expense of everything else. The decline in trust in expertise is explained by the very structure of the enclosed and privatised knowledge economy: expertise does not work in the public interest but rather in the interest of capital. This, for Davies (2018), has created an over-abundance of expertise and has undermined the authority that expertise once held. It is evident, therefore, that it is not Trumpism, right-wing politics nor a 'post-truth' moment that is responsible for democratic decline and social instability. Rather, these are symptoms of neoliberal capitalism's anti-social affect and latent authoritarianism, which is increasingly incompatible with liberalism. Biden's electoral victory is perhaps not a 'return to normal' but the last gasp of the liberal order (Varoufakis 2020). Biden, himself an elderly, frail and semi-incoherent figure, seems to be an apt metaphor for liberalism's decline, the very embodiment of zombie neoliberalism (Marcetic 2020). Biden's win occurred in the midst of an economic recession and the Covid-19 pandemic, alongside record low levels of enthusiasm for Biden as a candidate (Karp 2021). In this sense, Biden won by simply presenting himself as the negation of Trump and nothing more (Karp 2021).

Atwater (2020) describes the decade following the Great Recession as "a slow-motion K-shaped recovery", referring to how capital recovered while the working class did not. This K-shaped recovery has further eroded neoliberal hegemony and the legitimacy of the liberal world order and led to 'backlash politics' mainly in the form of right-wing populism. Passari (2020) empirically demonstrates a direct correlation between economic crisis, measured by a rise in unemployment, and declining trust in democratic institutions along with support for right-wing populist movements in Europe. It is important to not understand the decline in neoliberal hegemony as merely the by-product of economic backlash, but rather as caused by a multitude of crises that threaten its legitimacy. Ecological crises implicate capitalism as a causative factor, but also expose its inability

to resolve this existential crisis through market mechanisms. The “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” required to avert climate catastrophe will not happen without state intervention and international cooperation and coordination, something that has become apparent as market-driven interventions continually fail to drive down emissions (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018). The culmination of these crises has led to speculation that the liberal world order is in a terminal state of decline, with Duncombe and Dunne observing that mainstream theories within International Relations scholarship seem to concur that the ‘hegemony’ of the liberal world order is “over” (Duncombe and Dunne 2018, 25).

This crisis of legitimacy does not make social transformation inevitable, but it does present a political opportunity, as cracks in the façade of capitalist realism appear and grow. The COVID-19 pandemic presents another widening of the cracks in capitalist realism and potentially the end of the American era (Davis 2020). Recent research, triggered by the pandemic, has re-assessed the sociological consequences of major historical epidemics (Alfani 2020). The major focus of this research has been on the distributive consequences of epidemics. Scheidel’s (2017) work tracing the global history of inequality noted that inequality is usually narrowed as a result of warfare, revolution, state-collapse and natural disasters. Scheidel (2017) draws on the Black Death in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which claimed half of Europe’s population. This, he demonstrates, led to a scarcity of labour and therefore increased wages. The rise in expectations of labourers following this led to the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 and the beginning of the end of feudalism. Alfani (2020) argues such a levelling event is unlikely with COVID-19, and that the Black Death was exceptional, a result of its high mortality rate. Instead, as in the case of the 1918 influenza, Alfani (2020) points out it is likely that COVID-19 will see the increase of income inequality rather than a brutal levelling. This is because of a lower mortality rate and its already disproportionate impact on working class impoverished and vulnerable socio-economic communities. Does this mean, as

French author Michel Houellebecq (quoted in Le Point Magazine 2020) argued, “we will not wake after this in a new world. It will be the same, just a bit worse”?

Davis (2020) believes that we will wake after this in a new world because of the “devastating impact that the pandemic has had on the reputation and international standing of the United States”. Davis focuses here on how the United States’ failure to effectively respond to the pandemic revealed how neoliberalism had hollowed out and depleted state capacity, leaving it unable to coordinate an adequate response. While Davis (2020) focuses on the United States, the state failure in other neoliberal economies, particularly the United Kingdom, is also undeniable. Saad-Filho (2020) notes that the deindustrialised and neoliberalised economies of the United States and the United Kingdom left them, firstly, without the productive capacity needed to supply health equipment to medical professionals, let alone the broader public. Secondly, the fragmentation and decentralisation of the economy and “a wide range of systems of provision” has prevented a coordinated health response (Saad-Filho 2020, 1). Finally, the dismantling of state capacity means that the mass vaccination programs initiated at the end of 2020 have been shambolic and chaotic. At the current vaccination rate in the United States, it will take 10 years to vaccinate enough Americans to control the pandemic (Murphy and Siemaszko 2021). The snail’s pace of the vaccination program is in contrast to the historic achievements of mass vaccination programs undertaken by the United States in the 1940s. In 1947, for example, New York City vaccinated 6 million people in less than a month after a single case of smallpox in Manhattan (Sepkowitz 2004).

As other countries took measures to contain or eliminate the spread of the virus, both the United States and the United Kingdom ignored public health experts and were slow to react. Taking action to prevent the spread of COVID-19, through various public health measures including lockdowns and mask mandates, was pitted against the health of the economy (Saad-Filho 2020).

The political establishment and sections of business interests urged Americans and Britons to learn to 'live with the virus' in order to prevent economic downturn (Saad-Filho 2020). This trade-off has since been shown to be demonstrably false and short-sighted, with countries who did take rapid action to lockdown and mandate public health measures in a far healthier economic state than those who did not (Smyth 2020). The moment, however, was illuminating, and it demonstrated a fundamentalist economic and political establishment clinging to the cult of individualism and market supremacy, bereft of any ability to respond to extrinsic crises. Eventually, the United States and the United Kingdom were forced by public pressure and examples of success elsewhere to initiate regional lockdowns in the former's case, and a national lockdown in the latter. These lockdowns, however, were undermined by state disorganisation, as well as poor and contradictory communication (Saad-Filho 2020).

As of February 2021, the United States boasts having the most cases of COVID-19 in the world, as well as the highest death rate. The United Kingdom is not far behind, with the fourth most cases per million of COVID-19 and the fifth highest death rate (Smith 2020). In the absence of political leadership, fringe COVID-19 denialists began to gain traction propagating conspiracy theories and misinformation about the pandemic. Some have attempted to solely rest the blame for this calamity on the Trump administration, and in the United Kingdom, the Conservative government led by Boris Johnson.

However, Davis (2020) argues that these figures are "less the cause" of "decline than a product of its descent". He further links the COVID-19 response with a growing global realisation that the United States, in particular, cannot function as a world leader in respect to other global threats such as climate change. As a result, Davis (2020) concludes that the pandemic has accelerated the end of the American era and its eclipse by Asia, in particular China. In contrast to the response by the United States and the United Kingdom, China has demonstrated an ability to control the



pandemic “rapidly and effectively” (Burki 2020, 1240). China’s pandemic response was, in part, a consequence of its experience with SARS-CoV in 2002, but primarily the result of a “highly centralised epidemic response system” and state coordination and capacity (Burki 2020, 1241).

Mike Davis (2005, 36) expertly outlined over 15 years ago the increased threat of pandemics due to “multinational capital” through the “burning or logging out of tropical forests, the proliferation of factory farming, the explosive growth of slums, and the failure of the pharmaceutical industry to find profit in mass producing lifeline antivirals, new-generation antibiotics and universal vaccines”. Importantly, Davis (2005) demonstrates that the threat of increased pandemics was imminent as a result of this and that public health experts have continually urged world leaders of the need to prepare to meet it. These pleas were mostly ignored in the Global North and heeded in Asia (Davis 2005).

The failure observed in the United States and the United Kingdom has thoroughly damaged the international reputation and legitimacy of both countries at a crucial geopolitical moment, where Western hegemony is being eclipsed by the ascendancy of Asia. Similarly, it has thoroughly discredited neoliberal orthodoxy, even among sections of the capitalist intelligentsia. In April 2020, the editorial board of the Financial Times (2020), one of the largest business newspapers in the world, lamented that the virus had laid bare the “frailty of the social contract”, calling for:

Radical reforms — reversing the prevailing policy direction of the last four decades — will need to be put on the table. Governments will have to accept a more active role in the economy. They must see public services as investments rather than liabilities and look for ways to make labour markets less insecure. Redistribution will again be on the agenda; the privileges of the elderly and wealthy in question. Policies until recently considered

eccentric, such as basic income and wealth taxes, will have to be in the mix. (Financial Times 2020)

Similarly, the International Monetary Fund (2020, 34) argued in their recent fiscal monitor report that advanced capitalist economies needed to boost public investment and take on “large transformational infrastructure projects” in order to prevent economic decline in the post-pandemic era. The organisation urged countries to cast aside outmoded neoliberal orthodoxies around the danger of taking on public debt (The International Monetary Fund 2020). This startling ideological shift from some sections of the capitalist class could possibly indicate the end of the end of history, with capitalist realism giving way to the return of politics. After all, even Francis Fukuyama has lamented that “socialism ought to come back” (quoted in Eaton 2019).

In many ways, the pandemic has demystified the neoliberal economy, as well as the nature and value of work. It has also clarified the importance of the neoliberal state in protecting capital in periods of crisis. This demystification is necessary to expose the true nature of power relations under capitalism. Adam Tooze (2019) suggests that the demystification of capitalism’s inner workings is essential in the development of class consciousness. The demystification of the economy has occurred in a couple of ways. Firstly, there is the widespread categorisation of ‘essential workers’ – workers whose labour is essential for the functioning of society. Secondly, there is the rapid state intervention within advanced capitalist economies to protect asset holders, leading to the decoupling of the FIRE economy from the real economy.

The restriction of movement and the shutdown of non-essential sectors of the economy have forced most jurisdictions to define ‘essential work’. In this process, the nature of work and its relationship to the creation of value has been partially demystified, Hayek’s claim that “the economy cannot be represented or made calculable” (Tooze 2019). Indeed, what the

categorisation of essential workers has demonstrated is that it is not only possible to represent and calculate the economy, but that many essential workers, despite their essential nature, are low-wage workers, such as cleaners, cashiers, postal workers and care workers. As these low-wage essential workers braved the frontline of the pandemic, often in unsafe, crowded conditions and without being provided adequate personal protective equipment, the essential economic value and devaluation of these low-wage workers was abundantly obvious.

In addition to this, the pandemic also sharply exposed the division within the labour market, as three tiers of workers clearly emerged in advanced capitalist economies. Firstly, there are professional workers in the knowledge economy, who constitute a privileged minority class, generally have stable employment, financial security, above-average wages, and most of whom were able to 'work from home' safely during the pandemic (Bonacini, Gallo, and Scicchitano 2021). Secondly, workers in the service economy, who are often in precarious, intermittent and low-waged employment with little financial security, had no choice but to continue to work in often unsafe and hazardous conditions (Isser 2020). Finally, huge numbers of workers in sectors unable to operate at full capacity during the pandemic found themselves suddenly unemployed and reliant on government assistance (International Labour Organisation 2021).

The pandemic spurred the state to act to intervene in the market and everyday life in a manner unseen in the neoliberal era. The scale of the pandemic necessitated a form of disaster socialism, or perhaps more accurately Covid corporatism, with New Zealand business executive Rob Campbell commenting that "there's no-one more socialist than a businessman who has had his business go bad" (quoted in Fox 2020). Coulter (2020, 534) questions whether the pandemic might signal the "unlikely rebirth of corporatism". Jäger (2020) meanwhile asks whether neoliberalism has died even though the Left has not killed it, speculating that "war socialism" could be on the horizon. This line of questioning is also pondered by Matthewman (2020), who

comments that disasters tend to engender “the coming together of people for other to secure a world together”.

This ‘war socialism’, however, was brief – a fevered reaction to the shock of the pandemic. Rather than a great equaliser, as the pandemic has continued, there has clearly emerged a great divergence, with vulnerabilities and risk having a distinct class basis. In almost all jurisdictions, ensuring financial support for capital was a priority, with the United States passing the largest corporate bail-out in history (Abramson and Elliot 2020). In the United States and the United Kingdom, uninterrupted capital accumulation took precedence over lives with little to no support available (Saad-Filho 2020). Workers were therefore faced with the impossible decision of putting themselves at risk of illness and continuing to go to work, or risk starvation and homelessness. In the United States, the Trump administration’s decision to allow non-essential businesses to operate was described by a union official advocating for workers in Iowa as “genocide against the working class. It’s hard to visualise it and articulate it for what it is” (Jesse Case quoted in Cullen 2020).

### *New Zealand: A Promised Land?*

I would argue that New Zealand currently appears to be at a similar juncture that the United States was in 2008. The government’s response to the pandemic and our ability to escape the worst of it has led to a glowing assessment of New Zealand and Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. The international praise has been effusive and gushing. One headline from *The Atlantic* referred to Ardern as the most “effective leader on the planet” (Friedman 2020). Another article from the *New York Times* (2020) described her leadership during the pandemic as a “master class.” *Prospect* (2020) magazine ranked her second in a list of the world’s top fifty thinkers. Umair Haque (2020),

a British economist and businessman, even referred to Ardern as the “new leader of the 21st century,” praising her as standing for “democracy, civilization, equality, goodness, and truth, in an age of collapse and chaos.”

This effusive praise is the result of Prime Minister Ardern and the Sixth Labour government’s deft handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike the United States and the United Kingdom, the Sixth Labour government acted quickly to institute a national lockdown to eliminate the virus. At the same time, they instituted a quarantine system for all international arrivals and provided financial support to businesses and workers. So effective was this response that New Zealand has ‘eliminated’ spread of the virus locally, as a result many consider it to be the “gold standard” (Thomas 2020). Claridge (2020, 1) notes a higher level of “community cohesion and solidarity” in New Zealand’s COVID response in contrast to countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Claridge (2020, 3) points to research that demonstrates high levels of support and trust in the government noting that “compared to other countries enforcement only required a light touch”. Claridge (2020, 2) attempts to illuminate where this solidarity comes from making reference to New Zealanders as being “egalitarian, inclusive and progressive”.

There is little to substantiate Claridge’s claims about New Zealander’s progressiveness. However, she does also note that historically New Zealanders “have not been afraid to vote for governments that happily wield the power of the state” (Claridge 2020, 2). This observation is more illuminating as it references the historic centrality of the state in New Zealand society (Jesson 1992). It is partly this legacy, which I would posit has informed the success of New Zealand’s COVID response. So far, I have highlighted how the centrality of the state fostered a culture of anti-intellectualism in New Zealand (Jesson 1992). The other side of this is that, perhaps, it also created a latent collectivism and social solidarity that governments are able to draw on.

While the Sixth Labour government evoked and reflected New Zealand's legacy of state intervention in their public health response to the pandemic, their economic response, in contrast reflects an unwillingness to break with neoliberal orthodoxy. The inadequacy of the government's fiscal response has been primarily to protect asset owners, at the expense of the renting classes. Recently, it has been revealed that the Reserve Bank of New Zealand repeatedly warned the government that their fiscal response aimed at protecting asset prices – which included lowering interest rates, digitally printing money and making cheap credit readily available – would increase inequality and inflate assets bubbles (Tibshraeny 2021).

As was predicted, the policy bolstered the price of assets, favouring the FIRE economy at the expense of other sectors of the economy and the working class (Tibshraeny 2021). Like the Great Recession before, the economic recovery from the pandemic appears to be K-shaped. This is evident in the remarkable performance of the stock market, which, after an initial drop caused by the shock of the pandemic, has rebounded. In New Zealand, a similar pattern is evident with the housing market, where housing prices have risen to record levels, adding an extra \$45 billion dollars to the value of real estate in the year 2020 (Tibshraeny 2021).

The government, despite this warning, has done nothing to mitigate this, allowing the housing bubble to further inflate while doing little to support working class New Zealanders. This has resulted in a K-shaped recovery, with there being a marked increase in unemployment, underemployment and housing precarity, while asset prices have skyrocketed (Tibshraeny 2021). At a national level, real estate value increased 23.3 percent in seven months (Tibshraeny 2021). The divergence caused by the financial response to the pandemic has further exacerbated the divide between the “haves” and the “have nots”, which Tibshraeny (2021) notes could lead to political radicalisation and even “civil unrest”. It is hard not to see the similarities in Labour's response to this economic crisis and the Obama administration's inadequate response to the

Great Recession. It is for this reason that I argue that New Zealand is about a decade behind political trends elsewhere in the Global North, rather than being an exception.

The ever-inflating housing bubble and increasing divergence between the owning class and the renting class is a political and social crisis in the making, something that many commentators are beginning to acknowledge (Hickey 2020, Tibshraeny 2021). At the same time, it seems unlikely that the government will change course, with Prime Minister Ardern stating that people 'expect' the value of their houses to keep rising and the government would not be looking at fiscal policy which would see asset values decrease (Tibshraeny 2020).

In New Zealand today, unlike large parts of Europe, the United States and the United Kingdom, capitalist realism is entrenched, and neoliberalism retains hegemonic status. There has yet to be a true crisis of legitimacy, though it appears one may be on the horizon. Even though Ardern has brought little new to the table, she has been cemented in the minds of many as the antithesis of right-wing populism (Haque 2020). This has led some to question whether New Zealand is a populist exception, a liberal capitalist society which has somehow escaped the contradictions of capitalism (Vowles and Curtin 2020). I argue the opposite is true, and rather being ahead of the curve, New Zealand is behind it. New Zealand has not yet seen the political crises observed elsewhere, in part because it was able to avoid the worst of the Great Recession through its relationship with China (Easton 2020).

However, the economic crisis precipitated by the pandemic and the K-shaped recovery leaves us in a familiar situation. At a political level, the Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern comes across as an antipodean Obama figure. Both Obama and Ardern are charismatic leaders who won the support of working class voters amid an economic crisis. Like Obama, Ardern so far has not adequately responded to the economic challenge facing New Zealand.

In this chapter, I have traced the history of neoliberalism and argued the central legacy of the neoliberal project is the destruction of the organised working class. In order to defeat the threat of working class agency, the neoliberal project created a hard and hollow society defined by the absence of any mediating links between people and the state. The absence of a collective agent able to challenge capital has been especially acute in the aftermath of the Great Recession, which delivered a blow to neoliberalism's legitimacy while also resulting in the acceleration of capital's accumulation of the life world. The paradoxical nature of the post-2008 moment presents us with a need to account for the Left's inability to present an alternative to neoliberal capitalism. More recently, the great divergence between the working and capitalist classes in their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has further eroded neoliberalism's legitimacy.

The pandemic has made the economy representable and calculable. While this may have mortally wounded neoliberalism, contrary to Jäger's (2020) hypothesis, it is becoming clear that it has not died. Social transformation does not look imminent without a collective agent able to realise it. The economic recovery, so far, has been a K-shaped recovery, with the brief social solidarity between capital and labour evaporating as soon as the market began to recover. As the pandemic continues to accelerate and mutate while vaccine programs stall, it is impossible to predict what will happen. Habermas (quoted in Lenel 2020) characterises the impossibility of knowing what is to come as an "existential uncertainty", commenting that "there never was so much knowing about our not-knowing and about the constraint to act and live in uncertainty. it is not simply that we don't know what goes on, we know that we don't know, and this not-knowing is itself a social fact, inscribed into how our institutions act."



## Chapter 4: Characters in Search of an Exit

He says the best way out is always through.

And I agree to that, or in so far

As that I can see no way out but through

Leastways for me-- (Frost 1915)

Our current interregnum presents an opening for emancipatory politics. The potential end of the American era, neoliberalism's crisis of legitimacy and the existential threat of climate catastrophe give legitimacy to anti-capitalist politics. However, this project can only be realised provided there is a collective agent able to give it material expression. Constructing this collective agent is the urgent task of emancipatory politics. Indeed, it is the absence of collective agency that has haunted the Left since the defeat and retreat of the organised working class in the 1980s. This thesis has been an attempt at exorcising the ghost of the Left's defeat, with the aim of moving through it and re-inventing the future.

The creation of collective agency can only be realised through both mourning the losses and learning from the potential of past revolutionary moments. The persistent lack of a sustainable and organised challenge to capital in the last 40 years has obvious structural causes, namely the dismantling and decline of the organised working class. However, at the level of agency, the contemporary Left also contributes to this lack as it remains defined by a pervasive defeatism. This is a testament to the unrealised and unprocessed grief over the losses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

expressing itself in a rejection of materialism and of political struggle itself. This rejection of materialism is evident in both the widespread denigration of and nostalgia for the historic Left, alongside the fantastical belief that the key to overcoming capitalism is to either go back in time or to discard history completely and innovate our way to a new world. Both strains of thinking reflect a profound ignorance and an overinflated sense of the importance of contemporary Left movements.

Borealis (2018) characterises the contemporary Left as manic, a feature of the later stages of mourning. This mania is expressed in a desire to “devour everything that comes its way” with ideas “taken in quickly, but just as quickly expelled from consciousness”. This is born from a need to repress and avoid confronting loss while demonstrating a false resilience. The by-product of this mania is an inability to analyse or understand the situation with any clarity. Borealis argues this leaves the Left committed to fight for everything all the time, as it is in denial of the “fact that it is currently in a position to win nothing, having been defeated and isolated from the mass constituency it needs to effect change” (Borealis 2018). To overcome this mania, there is a need to mourn the movement and confront the reality of the Left’s powerlessness and the urgent task of rebuilding working class agency. In effect, we have to start again.

### *Folk Politics*

Scrnicek and Williams (2015, 16) diagnose the contemporary Left, at least up until 2016, as dominated by what they term “folk politics” and “folk-political thinking”, citing the anti-globalisation and Occupy Wall Street as examples of folk politics. Folk politics is defined by “the fetishisation of local spaces, immediate actions, transient gestures, and particularisms of all kinds” (Scrnicek and Williams 2015, 16). Rather than seeking to build sustainable organisations and hegemony, folk politics is hostile to formal structure or hierarchy, focusing instead on constructing

prefigurative “bunkers to resist the encroachments of global neoliberalism” (Scrnicek and Williams 2015, 16).

In many ways, the folk politics of the contemporary Left is not politics at all, if we understand politics as an attempt to shift relations of power. This is Gramsci’s (1971) definition of politics as struggles with relations and structures of power. Gramsci (1971,147) referred to certain political tendencies as “apoliticism”, arguing that while ostensibly political, these tendencies did not engage or attempt to shift power relations and therefore could not meet the criteria for political interventions or politics at all. Apoliticism is a useful concept in understanding politics as the product of engagement with structures of power toward the aim of re-shaping the world. This allows us to view ‘doing politics’ materially rather than as an abstraction. The expression of political opinion is therefore not politics; politics is outward looking and inherently social, seeking to transform society, and not merely react to it. Smucker (2014) argues the bunker mentality of the contemporary Left is symptomatic of self-marginalising apoliticism.

Both Scrnicek and Williams (2015) and Smucker (2014) argue the anti-globalisation movement of the early 2000s and Occupy Wall Street, with emphasis on occupying local spaces and horizontalism were symptomatic of this. Crucially, they also argue that this apoliticism limited their potential to connect with a mass constituency. It is difficult to compare folk politics with the historical Left. The similarities are abstract, with the commonality being a shared critique of capitalism, but in form and content they otherwise differ dramatically. Folk politics is alienated from a mass constituency, resembling more of a subculture than a genuine political movement. It has minimal organic links to the working class, being composed mostly of self-selecting individuals. For Smucker (2017), the marginality and self-selecting nature of folk politics mean that many who take part “see it as an expression of their willingness to do something that is unpopular... with some coming to see their own marginalisation as a badge of honour”. In this

way, folk politics is a “radical oppositional niche identity” (Smucker 2017). This is not unique to the Left or folk politics. It is a mirror of neoliberalism’s emphasis on identity and self-expression, reflecting David Harvey’s (2011) hypothesis that dominant modes of production create a mode of opposition as a mirror image to itself.

If folk politics is a form of apoliticism, then Left populist movements mark the return of politics. The return of politics itself is a welcome development. In New Zealand, the time warp we occupy means that we have not yet seen a return of politics. Instead, the Left remains trapped in apoliticism and folk politics. As a result, the emergence of Left populism elsewhere in the Global North has been observed here with a curiosity and the sense that New Zealanders are bystanders of history rather than active participants. As I have outlined throughout this work though, New Zealand is not a populist exception or a place without history or politics. There remains an urgent need for a collective agent to challenge neoliberalism in New Zealand. It is for this reason that I believe it is fruitful to explore the dynamics and developments of Left populism elsewhere in the Global North.

### *Left Populism*

In the midst of the shock of the pandemic and the economic crisis that has followed, it almost seems outmoded to discuss Left populism, with the political spectacles of the pre-pandemic world seeming distant and historic in this ‘new world’. However, as the shock of the disaster has abated, so has the fever dream that the pandemic signalled the end of zombie neoliberalism. Capital has recovered, buoyed by the unprecedented amount of money being printed by central banks, while the working class has not (Hickey 2020). This has led to the stock market wholly decoupling from the real economy, emphasising great diversion in class experiences of the pandemic. So far,

Houellebecq's (quoted in Le Point Magazine 2020) prediction that the world will be the same, only a little bit worse, has been realised. Neoliberalism will not die without us killing it, and so the need to analyse projects which aim to create a countervailing 'politics' remains resonant.

So far, I have avoided defining populism because, as Jäger and Borriello (2020, 50), writes it is an "essentially contested concept". Jäger and Borriello (2020, 51) note that while many terms are contested and debated, what seems to set 'populism' apart is its almost exclusive "external usage" with very few political movements claiming the term. Jäger and Borriello (2020, 51) separate definitions of populism into four categories: (i) strategic, (ii) ideological, (iii) discursive, and (iv) institutional definitions.

Strategic definitions of populism see it as a political strategy to unify "a disorganised populace" (Jäger and Borriello 2020, 51). This strategy is distinguished from other forms of politics in that it makes recourse to the notion of a "people" against an "elite". The disorganisation of the populace requires a "connection between leader and followers" that is based on "direct, quasi-personal contact" without any organisational and institutional mediation (Weyland 2001, 14). Ideological definitions of populism meanwhile, describe it as a "thin ideology" that divides society into two classes, people and the elite. Populism's ideological aim, therefore, is to reform the state so that it reflects the people rather than the elite (Jäger and Borriello 2020). Jäger and Borriello (2020, 52) argue that the institutional definition of populism as a 'thin ideology' means it has to attach itself to a "host ideology" as it cannot operate alone, and it is for this reason that iterations of populist movements are so varied.

Discursive definitions of populism, as popularised by Laclau (1977, 192), view populism as a "political logic" rather than an ideology or strategy. This strand of literature on populism emphasises it as a discursive device to create a "people" out of heterogeneous groups. The

construction of this people requires “an enemy formation” to define it through negation (Jäger and Borriello 2020, 53). Discursive definitions of populism are broad and do not locate it as a politics situated in specific historical conditions. In contrast, institutional definitions of populism attempt to locate it within the specific historical conditions in which it has emerged. This literature views populism as a reaction to democratic decline and the social void left by the retreat of institutional mediation and organisation. The institutional view of populism views it as “sidestepping classical party channels” which places it in “complimentary relation to technocracy” (Jäger and Borriello 2020, 53). Institutional definitions therefore locate populism as a reaction to democratic decline and a lack of institutional mediation between the people and political parties, viewing technocracy as having a dialectical relationship with populist movements, and these two cleavages as defining the contemporary political moment. Synthesising the literature, Jäger and Borriello (2020, 54) broadly define populism as a “specific political logic operative in an era of declining party mediation”.

Jäger and Borriello (2020) view Left populism as a political response to a “hard and hollow” (Bickerton 2013, 71) political environment of neoliberalism. It follows then that political resistance mirrors the circumstances from which it emerges. Just as the structure of the mass party mirrored the structure of the factory under industrial capitalism, populism mirrors the “hard and hollow” nature (Bickerton 2013, 71) of the neoliberal era, through the emphasis on direct links between political leaders and the people, as well as the attempt to create a ‘people’ from a fragmented and disorganised society. In effect, Left populism appears as a short-cut to counter-hegemony in the face of a fragmented and disorganised working class.

Proponents of Left populism question the salience and centrality of class struggle in this era of disorganisation and fragmentation (Mouffe 2018). This argument is premised around the fact that the industrial working class and its institutional forms have retreated and declined, while the post-

industrial working class is fragmented and disorganised. Srnicek and Williams (2015, 406) argue that, as a result of these trends, “today there is no longer a class faction that can hegemonise a class”. In lieu of a coherent working class agent, Mouffe (2018, 29) states that Left populism requires the establishment “of a chain of equivalence among the demands” of various exploited and oppressed social actors. Workers are among these groups, but class is flattened into one of many forms of oppression.

So far, experiments in Left populism have challenged the feasibility of this “short-cut” to counter-hegemony. Left populist movements as an organised working class agent appear vulnerable and easily defeated. Prominent experiments in Left populism such as SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Bernie Sanders in the United States and Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour leadership have all faltered and failed (Jäger 2020). That is not to say these experiments did not demonstrate the potential of a populist strategy, but these setbacks and defeats must be understood and learned from. The potential of Left populism is seen in the resurrection of Left politics itself as a project which aims to re-shape and transform society, and this is undoubtedly a promising development. The fact that millions of people gravitated towards these campaigns despite relentless attacks from the corporate media and political establishment is a testament to a nascent anti-capitalist political subject emerging from the post-2008 interregnum. The programs of these Left populist movements also nurture the Left’s political imagination and give the Left concrete demands to rally and organise around.

These concrete demands have the potential to help the Left transcend the mournful mania that demands it be about ‘everything all the time’ and instead give Left politics clarity and political priorities. The best example of this is Bernie Sanders’ Medicare for All demand. Throughout his presidential campaigns, Sanders has expertly demonstrated that Medicare for All is more than a policy. Instead, it is a strategy, and the perfect fight to pick with capital. Fong and Offenbacher

(2019) argue that the challenge of taking “the nascent left” in America and turning it into a “durable, working class movement” requires political demands that are “anchored in the lives of working people and institutions”. On that basis, political demands should not be determined by “moral or objective exigency”, but rather must be rooted in the material conditions of the present and consider what will attract the millions of people required to challenge the waning status quo (Fong and Offenbacher 2019). It is for this reason that Sanders made Medicare for All the central plank of both his campaigns, understanding the wide appeal of such a demand and its ability to resonate with the millions of people who have no health insurance, are underinsured or whose health insurance is dependent on their employment. Such is the dysfunction of the privatised healthcare system in the United States that, for many people, any interaction with it is enough to leave them desperate for an alternative. Fong and Offenbacher (2019) point out it is for this reason that Medicare for All has the potential to lead to “mass politicisation”. It also fractures the class solidarity of the capitalist class. For businesses who do provide insurance to employees, universal healthcare would be an enormous cost-saver, while for the private healthcare, insurance and pharmaceutical industries, it is an existential threat. Fong and Offenbacher (2019) note the importance of political demands that fracture capitalist class solidarity whilst engendering working class solidarity. The Sanders campaign, more so than the other experiments in Left populism, understood the centrality of non-reformist reforms in creating and constructing collective agency.

In the wake of Sanders’ and Corbyn’s recent defeats, however, we must acknowledge that the Left populist call “sounded tinny and thin” across much of the social world and understand why that is (Winant 2020). Despite the majority of the population in the United States supporting Medicare for All, Sanders was not able to prevail against Joe Biden, a candidate who did not support universal healthcare. Understanding this phenomenon is key to forging a path forward from these defeats. Winant (2020) offers a granular analysis of Sanders’ defeat, demonstrating that the places where his message resonated were parts of the country where “existing pockets



of organisation received it, amplified it and sent it back out". Davis (2020) also notes that the Democrats performed best in places where there were organised social movements. Winant (2020) argues that the explanation for this is simple: "if your experience of the world bears no residue of popular power, and no residue of that power having brought about any improvements in the quality of your...lives, it is natural that such promises" of a better world "sound fraudulent" and impossible.

Interestingly, both Sanders and Corbyn seemed acutely aware of the political vulnerabilities of a Left populist strategy. Sanders emphasised the importance of connecting with existing infrastructures of resistance and social movements, emphasising that political change was impossible without a mass movement, stating that, if he were able to win the presidency, he would be an "organiser in chief" (Day 2020). Corbyn also recognised the importance of realising collective agency at granular level, founding a Community Organising Unit that aimed to rebuild the Labour Party as a mass organisation embedded within communities (Williams 2020). These efforts did not prove to be enough or able to overcome the contemporary disorganisation and fragmentation of the working class but demonstrate that both Corbyn and Sanders were aware of the limitations of a Left populist strategy that simply mirrors the 'hard and hollow' nature of neoliberalism.

The setbacks and failures of Left populism necessitate a reassessment of the strategy as a shortcut to power, with particular reference to the foregoing class-rooted politics and its replacement with a nebulous 'people' linked by experiences of oppression and exploitation. This collage of identities has a strong anti-materialist bent and does not locate oppression as the result of "non-subjective structural dynamics"; Instead, it folds class into another identity category (Fife and Hines 2020). This flattening of class obfuscates how class operates as a structure from which all other oppression flows. The flattening of class into another identity, besides being anti-

materialist, undermines class solidarity, as it elides the common ground for political action rooted in class politics. At the same time, it is not enough to rhetorically conjure a class-based politics when the working class remains structurally fragmented and disorganised, something that the Sanders campaign attempted to do with his repeated references to the working class. Left populism's failures demonstrate there are no short-cuts to power. Collective agency cannot be conjured up from the bully pulpit whilst people have no experience of collective agency and popular power in their everyday lives. It is only through the experience of collective struggle at a granular level that collective-class agency is created.

It is for this reason that Mike Davis (2018, 49) argues it would be a "gigantic mistake" for the starting point of Left renewal to be a "funeral for the 'old-working class". The working class, through the wage-labour relation, continues to occupy a unique and revolutionary position; it has not been fired from history, but rather 'demoted in agency'" (Davis 2018, 49). This demotion does not change the revolutionary potential of the working class' position in its separation from any means of personal subsistence, converting the very natural and human desire for autonomy into a desire for collective control and ownership of production (Davis 2018). But it does make the challenge to realise this potential steeper and more difficult than ever. Still, the fact remains that the working class which has no "vestigial stake in the preservation of private ownership of the means of production or the reproduction of economic inequality" means that it remains the historical agent able to bring about social transformation (Davis 2018, 90).

To reject this is to reject a path to popular power through the convergence of struggles via class politics. In addition to this, the working class' ability to withhold its labour power remains one of the most powerful and effective tools against capital (Davis 2018). Not only is the strike a powerful tool in its ability to halt production, but it is through collective strike action that working class agency and social solidarity is created. The histories of the Old and New Left demonstrate that

agency is forged through class struggle. Capitalist subjects who have been socialised as disempowered, atomised individuals realise their own capacity for agency and latent power in collective action, and in this process objectified subjects are turned into collective agents. Mike Davis observes that his experiences in the New Left demonstrated to him the power of collective agency, stating: “I’ve seen social miracles in my life, ones that have stunned me—the courageousness of ordinary people in a struggle” (quoted in Goodyear 2020).

Realising contemporary working class agency means recovering the history of working class agency and showing it as an active process. It is this history from below that demonstrates how working class organisations and class struggle transform and create working class agency. Collective power in everyday life translates to the ability to believe in our collective ability to realise a new world. A Left politics that rejects class politics and the need to create working class agency at a granular level cannot create the convergence of struggles at a scale required to bring about a collective agent able to transform society. Working class agency must be actively created through struggle; without this, the destructive tendencies of the neoliberal subject engender negative solidarity. Only class politics premised on the convergence of all struggles within the social terrain can transform neoliberal subjects into working class subjects. Without the common ground class politics provides, Left politics fragments into competitive struggles vying for recognition.

This competition for recognition reflects neoliberal subjectivity but also the political powerlessness of the Left which expresses itself in moralism and self-righteousness. Mark Fisher (2013) referred to this configuration as the “Vampires’ Castle”, a mode of politics that “reflects this historical moment rather than offering any escape from it”. For Fisher (2013), the Vampires’ Castle reflects neoliberal subjectivity and the result of the proliferation of communicative capitalism. This process engenders “the multiplication of resistances and assertions so extensive that it hinders the

formation of strong counter-hegemonies” (Daubs 2017, 367). As Fisher (2013) notes, “class consciousness is fragile and fleeting [...] the culture industry has all kinds of subtle deflections and pre-emptions which prevent the topic even coming up, and then, if it does come up, they make one think it is a terrible impertinence, a breach of etiquette, to raise it”. The Vampires’ Castle operates to inhibit class consciousness through “a bourgeois-liberal perversion and appropriation” of feminist and anti-racist struggles (Fisher 2013). This perversion comes from the essentialising demand for recognition of these categories rather than emancipation from them. This essentialism leaves one “crippled by self-consciousness and isolated by a logic of solipsism which insists that we cannot understand one another unless we belong to the same identity group” (Fisher 2013).

This mode of liberal identity politics obfuscates the class relations and inhibits social solidarity. It mirrors the competitive logic of neoliberalism and the valorisation of society’s winners in a perverse inversion of its social Darwinist impulse. Instead, liberal identity politics celebrates marginality and converts suffering into social capital. Paradoxically, the Vampires’ Castle continually refers to structural critique while, in practice, focusing on condemning and excommunicating individuals rather than paying “attention to impersonal structures” (Fisher 2013). This, for Fisher (2013), is the opposite of the capitalist class who promote individualism while acting “as a class”. The embedded individualism, logic of competition and fetishisation of marginality exports guilt and fear rather than collectivism. The aim is to not to build power or a mass movement, despite that often being the outwardly stated purpose; instead, it is to have moral superiority.

The logic of the Vampires’ Castle is no longer fringe, but now commonly employed by the elite to cast class politics in opposition to feminist and anti-racist struggles. Both Sanders and Corbyn were subject to these attacks, with the corporate media referring to Sanders supporters as “Bernie Bros” whose support for Sanders supposedly flowed from their misogynistic attitudes towards

Hilary Clinton rather than their support for Sanders' democratic agenda (Wilz 2016). Similarly, Corbyn was the subject of a campaign of moral hysteria around antisemitism, primarily as a result of his solidarity with anti-imperialist movements in the Global South, particularly the Palestinian rights movement (Leifer 2020). There was little evidence for either claims (Spencer 2020), demonstrating clearly that the capitalist class are willing to exploit identity cleavages to inhibit class solidarity.

Reviving a collective working class agent requires a politics that does not simply reflect the current moment but offers us an escape from it. The working class might be 'demoted in agency', but it is not dead, retaining its potential as the historical agent of social change. Following the defeats of the 1970s, the Left has attempted to escape from the question of working class agency and find short-cuts to building power. Both folk politics and Left populism reflect this impulse, and both fail on their own terms. The Left is haunted by the spectre of working class agency in the same way capitalism is. The only way out is through, which means organising at local level to create a working class agency and giving this political expression by charting a passage once again between the "abandonment of the mass character, or the abandonment of the final goals" (Przeworski 1980, 28). The failures of political imagination seen in the historic compromise of social democracy emphasise the simultaneous importance alongside this work of honing and developing a working class political imagination that can see beyond capitalist realism.

Analysing accounts of the emergence of class consciousness in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrates that it arose on diverse terrains of social conflict (Davis 2018). This is important to re-evaluate economistic understandings of class struggle as taking place primarily within industrial contexts. The form that class struggle took was varied, with industrial conflict being one facet of resistance against exploitation and oppression. Davis (2018, 28) cites battles against "landlordism and the high cost of living, crusades for universal suffrage, anti-war

movements and campaigns of solidarity with workers and political prisoners in other countries". Class politics provided a common ground to create confluence between these otherwise disparate struggles, and as a result, Davis (2018, 28) argues that working class agency "derived from the capacity to unite and strategically synthesize the entire universe of proletarian grievances and aspirations as presented in specific conjunctures and crises". Concrete political demands and organisations that are rooted in the experiences of working class people, like Sanders' Medicare for All, provide an opportunity for a convergence of disparate struggles to come together under a shared banner. Marx emphasised this, stating that the workers' movement must address all forms of exploitation (Davis 2018). Building hegemony must start with revealing the structure of the social world and therefore the underlying interest structure of politics. Only a class politics can provide us with a foundation to struggle for a new world.

Recognising that the working class in the Global North has been 'demoted' in agency through the fragmentation of work under neoliberalism, whilst at the same time understanding the diverse terrains of social conflict on which class struggle must take place, is fruitful in clarifying what contemporary class politics might look like. Davis (2018) notes while the workplace itself may have been demoted in importance, elegies for the working class often overlook the importance of urban space in the development of class consciousness and working class agency. This is an oversight, with Engels (1993) himself noting that the working class subject is created through both industrialisation and urbanisation. It is the urban space, as much as anything else, that has given birth to labour movements. Davis (2018) argues that in an era of increasingly precarious work and structural unemployment and, simultaneously, rapid urbanisation, the political potential of the city takes on a renewed political importance, displacing the centrality of industrial heartlands. Davis (2018, 38) argues for a reassessment of "utopian urbanism that shaped socialist and anarchist thinking between the 1880s and the early 1930s" stating that the "new Dark Ages requires us to dream old dreams anew".

Davis' (2018) focus on urban spaces as sites of potential working class political renewal reflects the political trends from recent elections in the United States and United Kingdom, with metropolitan areas being sites where electoral socialist movements have been able to make impressive gains (Davis 2020). At the same time, former industrial regions have seen increasing levels of support for right-wing populism (Davis 2020). The disproportionate electoral weight given to rural areas has meant the latter trend has garnered a lot of attention while the former trend is often ignored. One example of this is the Sanders campaign's impressive victory in California, the most populous state in the United States. Sanders, in a very crowded field, beat Joe Biden by 8 percentage points. However, because of the under-weighting of California in the electoral system, this victory hardly registered as significant (Zhou 2020). Yet it was significant: California is home to 39.51 million people (Zhou 2020), and the fact that an avowed democratic socialist was able to prevail there should be cause for hope in the potential for a renewed working class politics.

On a political level, without the common ground and relations of solidarity grounded in material experiences that class politics provides, negative solidarity takes root (Fisher 2018). A return to class politics does not equate to a marginalisation of anti-racist or feminist movements, but rather allows these struggles to converge and intersect. The notion of class politics as inherently economistic is also ahistorical. It does not capture the how class struggle arose on diverse terrains consciousness in the Global North in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Davis 2018). The demotion of the working class due to the fragmentation of work necessitates that we explore the diverse terrains that class-based politics might organise in. The confluence of crises and the morbid threat of climate catastrophe give some urgency to the task of constructing working class agency. The challenge is immense and the obstacles enormous. The challenge is immense and the obstacles enormous. Culp (2016, 18) argues that we must truly grapple with this and 'invite death, not avoid

it". We cannot carry on as normal; "the only future we have comes from when we stop reproducing the conditions of the present". (Culp 2016,18)

### *Rebuilding Working Class Agency in New Zealand?*

New Zealand appears to be at a similar juncture that the United States was in 2008. In New Zealand today, unlike large parts of Europe, the United States and the United Kingdom (Davies 2016), capitalist realism remains entrenched, and neoliberalism retains hegemonic status (Hehir 2020). There has yet to be a true crisis of legitimacy, though it appears one may be on the horizon. The New Zealand Left is also behind the curve, with folk politics dominating the radical Left and complacency and retreat pervasive within what remains of the institutional Left (Lamusse 2018; Taylor 2017). The state of the Left reflects the continued hegemony of neoliberalism but also a dangerous degree of "complacency and political and intellectual laziness" emanating from New Zealand's hollow society (Kelsey 1997, 253). Folk politics has always existed on the margins of the New Zealand politics, but since the 'neoliberal revolution', it has dominated (Taylor 2008). Jesson (2005, 28) described marginal left-wing sects in 1973 as a:

fringe of political misfits, each member of it radicalises as an individual, not as part of a class or community... They cannot interact with society; they can only appeal to people to join them on the fringes. And the individual radical can have no goals: 'He is too conscious of his isolation and can only day-dream' about politics elsewhere.

Jesson's description of folk politics on the New Zealand Left remains as accurate now as it was then. The defeat of the organised working class has produced the same mournful mania in New Zealand as observed elsewhere, with the Left demonstrating a compulsion to be everything all



the time, while remaining allergic to strategy (Borealis 2018). While Left populism and strategic demands like Medicare for All have reintroduced politics to the Left elsewhere in the Global North, the New Zealand Left remains stuck in apoliticism and unable to offer any alternative to capitalist realism.

This is a similar position to the American Left in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Adolph Reed Jr. and Mark Dudzic (2015, 351) describe 2008 as a “Lazarus moment” for the Left, presenting it “with a crisis brought about by the classic contradictions of capitalism playing out on a political landscape shaped by vast and growing disparities of wealth and power”. For Reed Jr. and Dudzic (2015, 351), here was a moment according to “foundational mythologies” that would give “rise to revolution” or, at the very least, reforms. Yet the Left was “spectacularly unsuccessful in crafting a coherent response to this crisis, much less influence the terms of debate about its causes or solutions” (Reed Jr. and Dudzic, 351). Reed Jr. and Dudzic (2015, 351) trace the exaggerated proclamations about “the end of neoliberalism, unjustifiably inflated expectations of the Obama presidency, and the irrational exuberance stimulated by Occupy all point to the same reality”: there is no real Left worth talking about in the United States. I would argue that the New Zealand Left is at a comparable point, unsuccessful in “crafting a coherent response” to the economic crisis and housing bubble, unable to influence any debate about the problem.

The government’s early success at eliminating the spread of Covid, the social solidarity that made it possible and the wage subsidy scheme led some to declare that Covid might mark a turning point away from neoliberalism (Matthewman 2020). Similarly, there are remarkably inflated expectations of Ardern and her politics of kindness from the public and wider international community (Lamusse 2020). The irrational exuberance over our Covid success has promoted a New Zealand exceptionalism and a denial about the crises festering barely beneath the surface.

With no countervailing force to challenge this triumphant narrative, is there any real Left worth talking about in New Zealand?

Even without a Left worth talking about, there are indicators of discontent among sections of the working class. In 2018, the strike returned to New Zealand, with tens of thousands of workers taking strike action in a sudden increase in rank and file union activity (Webb 2019). A majority of these strikes were in the public sector, which remains the last bastion of the organised working class. This trend reflected how underfunded public services are, with teachers, midwives, ambulance drivers, nurses and doctors all taking strike action that year (Webb 2019). However, public sector workers were not the only ones who took action. Organised low-wage workers in the service industry also saw a smaller yet observable increase in industrial activity (Webb 2018). Whether this uptick in industrial action represents a sustained increase in strike activity or a blip is uncertain. What is interesting is how these actions appeared primarily rank and file led, with some union members raising concerns about what they viewed as complacency among union leadership who “had no desire to push for confrontation, recommending bad offer after bad offer” (International Socialist Organisation Aotearoa 2019). This seems to reflect what Bryce Edwards (2016) argues is the “poor health of the union movement” in New Zealand, apparent in a conservative and complacent tendency. Despite this, an increase in strike action and rank and file activity may provide hope of democratic renewal within the union movement.

The persistent lack of a Left worth talking about in New Zealand is demoralising. Mike Davis notes that we have reached the point where “global capitalism can no longer guarantee the survival of the human race, in three ways... It can’t generate jobs. It cannot guarantee the public health of the world. And it cannot decarbonize the economy or transfer the resources to adapt the countries that bear the brunt of greenhouse gases” (quoted in Goodyear 2020). This is true in New Zealand as it is elsewhere. There is an urgent need to attempt to re-build working class agency and class

politics. To do so requires a return to 'politics' and a rejection of apoliticism (Grasmci 1971). This requires political organisation and an outward rather than inward facing orientation. New Zealand's time warp allows us to learn from experiments in Left populism elsewhere and not repeat their mistakes. It is for this reason that, rather than try to emulate the hard and hollowness of neoliberal society as Left populism does, I advocate that the only way out is through. We need to return to class politics and build working class power in our communities and at a national level. In order to do this, the Left should prioritise three things:

1. Building an independent Left-wing media ecosystem.
2. Organising for democratic renewal, bold industrial strategy within the trade union movement.
3. The establishment of a new Left-wing political party.

The limitations of this thesis mean that I cannot explore in much detail the institutional barriers and structural impediments that would inhibit achieving these priorities. My aim here, in outlining these priorities, is to provide a springboard for debate and motivate myself and others to start thinking through these problems. These priorities are listed to drive future strategic conversations that I cannot include in this text, but which are crucial toward the creating a Left worth talking about.

The first priority of building an independent Left-wing media ecosystem is critical to building working class power in that it would foster a counterculture of critical enquiry and debate, combatting the pervasive anti-intellectualism within New Zealand's hollow society. New Zealand, as a state-created society, never developed strong and independent institutions to mediate the relationship between the people and the state (Jesson 1992). The hollow society produces a culture of anti-intellectualism and conservatism. To combat this requires an independent Left-

wing media ecosystem that fosters public intellectuals, promoting critical enquiry and debate. A thriving culture of public debate and intellectualism generates the political imagination necessary to create effective praxis. This Left-wing media ecosystem would be the antithesis of the privatised knowledge economy within the neoliberal academy. Boraman (2016) notes how a thriving independent Left-wing media ecosystem was critical to the mass dissent of the 1970s and demonstrates that its decline went hand in hand with the Left's defeat. An independent Left-wing media ecosystem would go a way towards developing an understanding of the particularities of the New Zealand condition, rather than imposing analysis from elsewhere and hoping it fits, something that Jesson (2005, 17) stressed the importance of. The academic Left has a role to play in realising this and should be challenged to take more public facing roles, translating their research into accessible and easily available formats.

Organising for a renewed and bold trade union movement is imperative to challenge a culture of complacency and conservatism that cannot effectively resist capitalist realism. Sue Bradford (2017, 2) calls for the New Zealand Left to become "braver". She argues that New Zealand's hollow society causes organisations to have an underdeveloped sense of their own "latent power" and "genuine capacity to take our future into our hands" (Bradford 2017, 2). In order to enable a brave trade union movement, the Left must organise and struggle within the trade union movement, contesting elections and promoting bold industrial strategy that simultaneously captures the energy and increasing militancy of rank and file members and looks at organising the unorganised. Thriving public debate and analysis of and from the Left might also enable the trade union movement to be "braver", rather than conservative and complacent. The challenge of reversing years of decline and retreat is steep, but the return of the strike shows a willingness and growing discontent over working conditions among rank and file union members. It is critical that this energy is harnessed and organised into a political force. Not only that, but it is also critical that there is an offensive effort, using the resources from public-sector unions to organise private

sector workers. I have demonstrated in this thesis how vital working class institutions are in teaching people what popular power looks like and creating working class agency. The Left needs to actively grow these institutions.

Lastly, the defeat of the New Zealand Left in the 1970s was partly the result of the alienation of the Labour Party from the trade union movement. The transformation of the Labour Party from a party of and for the working class into a cadre organisation of professionals meant that working class agency no longer had political expression or mass character. The lack of political representation for a radical and militant trade union movement in the 1970s meant that the potential of the movement remained unrealised. The importance of giving working class organisation political expression and mass character cannot be understated. The pitfalls of political representation, in that it may lead to the abandonment of the final goals at the same time, are evident. Electoral socialism gave the workers' movement a mass character, yet ultimately resulted in the abandonment of the final goal: the abolition of capitalism.

This thesis has attempted to provide an analysis and genealogy of class politics and working class to show a path forward for the contemporary left. The weaknesses of electoral socialism lay in its intellectual immaturity and lack of political imagination. Its emphasis on a politics of working class representation, rather than material working class interests, left them unable to articulate a tangible or workable program to achieve the final goal. The historic compromise between labour and capital was built to come undone. It provided early electoral socialists with a false exit from the daunting task of thinking through the realisation of going beyond capitalism. Despite this historic failure of political imagination, and the pitfalls of relations of representation, the contemporary Left cannot escape the necessity of, once again, charting between the two reefs of mass politics and the abandonment of the final goals.

There is currently no parliamentary party that represents the interests of the New Zealand working class. The Labour Party is a hollow and rudderless political vehicle composed of careerists, competing for the so-called centre ground with the National Party. Labourism has died with the Labour Party's historic relationship with working class voters weakening over time (Van Veen 2017). The historic affiliation between the trade union movement and Labour has persisted, though this reflects the ill-health of the trade union movement more than the class character of the Labour Party. Greenstone (1969, 362) describes how the American trade union movement operates "neither as a working class formation nor as a conventional interest group, but as an organised constituent interest of the Democratic Party". Greenstone's assessment of the American trade union movement as "an organised constituent interest", rather than a working class movement, is transferable to the contemporary New Zealand union movement. The affiliation between the trade union movement and Labour reflects how unions use their para-social relationship as an organised constituent interest with Labour to extract small concessions, in place of working class organisation and power. This is symptomatic of defeat and retreat.

For Bradford (2017), the only way to reverse this cycle of defeat and retreat is a new Left political party. The Green Party, the only nominally progressive party in parliament, cannot be this party as it is fundamentally unable to offer a class-rooted organisation with a mass character (Bradford 2017). The Green Party instead reflects an urban liberal sentimentality; it suffers from trying to be everything all the time and an inability to articulate itself as an unashamedly left-wing party (Edwards 2017). Bradford (2017, 1) characterises the party as having undergone a "rightward drift" recently. This is demonstrated in their promotion of fiscal responsibility and their recent decision to go into coalition with the Labour Party, despite having a clear opportunity to provide Left-wing opposition to the government (Sachs 2020).

Given the fragile ideological foundations of “green” environmental politics, a tendency that often describes itself as neither “left nor right” (Edwards 2017,1; Farquhar 2006, 15), an positioning which elides class and critiques of capitalism, promoting an environmental politics divorced from political economy, this is not surprising. It does, however, again point to the need for a new Left political party. Bradford (2017,1) argues “without the concurrent creation and development of a radical left party [...] we were never going to develop the mass-based ideological and organisational bases necessary if we were to become serious about moving beyond capitalism”. New Zealand’s proportional electoral system makes this a possibility, as there is a lower threshold for entering parliament and less pressure not to ‘split the vote’, which disciplines voters in first-past-the-post electoral systems to vote for parties that do not represent their interests (Bradford 2017).

Easton (2020) argues that little has changed since Jesson (1997) argued that New Zealand society was ‘hollow’. Eastern (2020, 881) observes New Zealand’s hollow society is slowly filling up, however civic society such as local government, the judicial system, universities, and the trade union movement remain “bureaucratic shells” who are largely subservient to central government and corporate New Zealand. While the centrality of the state in New Zealand has created a hollow society, in a truly dialectical fashion, it could also be a site of social renewal as I have observed. The social solidarity on display during the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated a latent collectivism (Claridge 2020), something that has been repressed in the individualistic neoliberal era.

In my view, there is an argument to be made that this is the positive legacy of New Zealand’s state-centred society. It has enabled a type of collectivism and an understanding of the role the state can play in creating a ‘good’ society. This ethos draws on the First Labour government and the construction of the welfare state, which for all its flaws and limitations, attempted to realise an egalitarian and fair society (Boston 2019). Mass state housing projects were seminal to this and

remain especially salient now in the midst of a housing affordability crisis. New Zealand's historic state housing projects should be wielded as a weapon, conjured up in the service of resisting a capitalist realism which insists there are no alternatives to the housing affordability crisis. Housing, it can be said, is the issue that has the potential to clarify and focus the New Zealand Left. It also remains the linchpin of capitalism in New Zealand. The housing crisis is the perfect fight to pick with capital in New Zealand – something that could create a durable working class movement. A program or set of demands that would de-commodify housing would be something “anchored in the lives of working people” and might “attract the millions required to challenge the status quo” (Fong and Offenbacher 2019).

All this is a substantial undertaking and requires a particular understanding of the New Zealand colonial condition and the adaptation of strategies, priorities and tactics as required. A renewed Left project must also understand and strategise how to transcend this colonial condition (Jesson 1992). This means that confronting legacies of colonialism, remembering historic Māori anti-capitalist resistance and building relationships with iwi and hapū is essential. Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) gives us a rich tapestry to draw from to imagine post-capitalist futures and political transformation. The *Matike Mai Aotearoa* report and consultations on constitutional transformation, based on Te Ao Māori, *He Wakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tirenī* (the 1835 *Declaration of the Independence of New Zealand* which recognised Māori sovereignty) and *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, led by Mutu and Jackson (2016), are a useful starting point towards that end. Sue Bradford (2017) stresses the importance of working class organisations building relationships and links of solidarity with Māori organisations fighting for constitutional transformation and tino rangatiratanga. She questions “whether it might be better” to have “sister organisations that are aligned” rather than trying to collapse the two into one (Bradford 2017, 4).



I agree with this sentiment. Class politics understands capitalism as the structure from which oppression flows while providing a common ground to converge these struggles. At the time, while decolonial and national liberation struggles implicate capitalism and class relations, they also have *independent* political aims and goals that do not necessarily align with an anti-capitalist project. It is, therefore, necessary in my view to build independent but inter-linked organisations, recognising points of unity *and* difference. The importance of building relationships of solidarity with Māori political formations and engaging with Te Ao Māori cannot be understated. The limit and scope of this thesis and my lack of expertise on this subject means I cannot provide an in-depth analysis on how a class-rooted and tino rangatiratanga politics might converge or diverge. There is certainly a lot of fruitful and constructive conversation to be had on this subject. I am reminded of King Tāwhiao's prophecy that "when the shoemakers, watchmakers, blacksmiths and carpenters rule this country then the Māori people will receive their salvation" (quoted in Franks and McAloon 2016, 99).

# Conclusion

The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making. (E.P Thompson 1963, 12)

The aim of this thesis has been to open up the engine of history and demonstrate how working class agency is made and unmade. The neoliberal revolution heralded the demotion of working class agency. The generation which has come of age during this period have never known or felt the residue of popular power in their lives. “It is easier to imagine the end of the world rather than the end of capitalism” (Jameson 2003, 76) for people who have always been at the mercy of forces so much larger than them (Fisher 2009). In this way, without collective agency, the working class are made objects rather than subjects of history.

The history of creating subjects from objects, of making the working class, demonstrates how agency can emerge from cracks in capitalist realism. The defeat of the working class in the 1970s and 80s does not necessitate holding a funeral for the historic agent of social transformation. It does, however, require us to mourn and process the magnitude of this loss. This thesis is an act of mourning, but more than that, it aims to recover the lost causes of the past in the service of defeating the social evils that remain. The existential threat of climate change gives urgency and begs the question of “who will build the ark” that will allow us to escape from the nightmare capitalism has engendered (Davis 2018, 239). The persistence of neoliberal capitalism, despite crisis, shows that there is no *deus ex machina* that will create an alternative or collective agent from nowhere. Therefore, “constructing a people is the main task of radical politics” (Laclau 2006, 646).

In this thesis, I have argued that the working class may have been demoted in agency, but it remains the agent of social transformation (Davis 2018). Rumours of the death of the working class have been greatly exaggerated. Class politics remains central to anti-capitalist politics, providing common ground to converge struggles on diverse social terrain. The organised working class, in the form of the trade union and electoral socialist movements, are the only political forces that have demonstrated the ability to challenge capital at scale. Class struggle remains the terrain which creates a common ground in which struggles can converge to form an effective counterhegemonic force. Within class struggle at a granular and interpersonal level collective agency is created and the potential of popular power to shape the world develops. The power of working class agency has shaped capitalist history. The contemporary absence of such a force has inspired this thesis to rescue these lost causes from history.

The neoliberal present, rather than the inevitable outcome of capitalist development, was the product of a struggle for hegemony between capital and labour in the 1960s and 1970s. This was capital acting to “defend itself against the spectre of a world which could be free” (Marcuse 1955, 93). The challenge for the Left today is to recommit itself to class struggle, which is a universal and particular project. The Left’s retreat from politics into apoliticism is symptomatic of defeat and self-marginalising. Left populism (Laclau 1977; Mouffe 2015 & 2018) marks a promising return to politics and away from apoliticism, yet it mirrors the “hard and hollow nature” (Bickerton 2013, 71) of the neoliberal era and the disorganisation and fragmentation of the working class, attempting to create a short-cut to hegemony by constructing a nebulous people (Mouffe 2018). Recent setbacks for Left populist electoral movements allow us to consider how the populist call sounded “tinny and thin” to many whose social world “bears no residue of popular power” or collective agency (Winant 2020). This illustrates that there are no shortcuts to building power and that the construction of collective agency requires transforming neoliberal subjects to collective subjects, something that is made possible by class struggle

The question of creating working class agency in New Zealand for instance can only be answered with a particular understanding of New Zealand and the colonial condition and form of racial capitalism that has developed here (Jesson 1992; Robinson 1983). As New Zealand is behind rather than in front of the curve, the New Zealand Left can also draw lessons from experiments in Left politics in comparable countries. I argue to create a Left worth talking about in New Zealand requires a politics of class struggle, which transforms objects into subjects at a granular level and is given mass character and political expression in the form of a party. It also needs to foster a culture of intellectual enquiry and the development of political imagination. The urgency and importance of this task in the face of climate catastrophe is enormous. We must truly process the increasing certainty that without an alternative to capitalism, human civilisation may not survive the century. Adorno and Horkheimer (2010, 45), argued that while we might not "believe that things will turn out well, the idea that they might is of decisive importance."

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