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Sting in the North?

‘There is [...] a real difference between North and South’, George Orwell said in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), and ‘at least a tinge of truth in that picture of Southern England as one enormous Brighton inhabited by lounge-lizards. For climatic reasons the parasitic dividend-drawing class tends to settle in the South’. Northern England has long claimed a proudly distinct identity from the South in general and the Westminster sphere in particular. But the truth is that, despite the North’s fierce sense of difference and an endless list of grievances aimed at the South, it has long demonstrated the most tepid, impotent and disorganised regionalism in Europe.

Antonio Gramsci’s unfinished essay ‘Some aspects of the Southern question’ (1926), interrupted by his arrest under Benito Mussolini’s fascist dictatorship, analyses the relatively recent Risorgimento (Italy was only fully unified in 1871) in light of complex regional and national divisions embedded over centuries. ‘The Northern bourgeoisie has subjugated the South of Italy and the Islands’, he wrote, ‘and reduced them to exploitable colonies’. During a speech at the third Communist Party of Italy Congress in Lyons in 1926, Gramsci once again denounced the ‘semi-colonial relationship between Northern and Southern Italy’, likening the exploitation of the ‘toiling masses of the South’ to the European imperial oppression of African and Asian peoples.

Enraged at Northerners’ smug condescension towards the South and the Islands – two very different regions lumped together as a lazy, benighted backwater by those in the industrialised cities of Turin, Milan and Genoa – Gramsci was initially a fierce Sardinian separatist. He later modified his stance into federalism but remained sharply critical of regional inequality. In the *Prison Notebooks* (1929–1935), written during his decade-long incarceration, Gramsci’s more mature reflections on the Southern Question form an ur-text for postcolonial theory, introducing the key concepts of cultural hegemony and subalternity and sketching a historiography of oppression that substantially influenced Edward



Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Said's contrapuntal and spatial analysis of imperialism as structured by the relationship between the metropolis and the periphery, for instance, is indebted to Gramsci's analysis of Italy's regional conflicts.

'Unity had not taken place on the basis of equality', Gramsci noted, 'but as hegemony of the North over the Mezzogiorno in a territorial version of the town-country relationship', as the North 'enriched itself at the expense of the South'. To the North, the poverty of the South was explained not by subjugation but 'the organic incapacity of the inhabitants, their barbarity, their biological inferiority'. Tom Hazeldine, riffing on Gramsci in his 2020 book *The Northern Question*, draws an analogy between 'the chauvinist disparagement of the Mezzogiorno and the condescension of London intellectuals towards unfashionable outlying stretches of the UK'. The comparison only goes so far, of course: unlike in Italy, as Hazeldine notes, it is England's industrialised regions that have been exploited by the landowning classes of the South. Yet thanks to Gramsci's pioneering regionalist critique, the Southern Question has remained front and centre in Italian politics into the twenty-first century – witness the rise of the right-wing federalist party Lega Nord, for example – whilst in England genuine regionalism failed to flourish.

To take another example, Spain's regions have enjoyed the status of 'autonomous communities' since 1978 but uneven decentralization of powers has ensured long-standing regional grievances still dominate political discourse. Catalonia, which voted for independence from Spain in 2017, has nurtured intense modern regional (indeed, nationalist) consciousness since the introspective *Renaixença* and the radical republican federalism of Valentí Almirall i Llozer and the Partido Republicano Democrático Federal. In the Basque region, the nationalist movement, active since the suppression of Basque *fueros* (a system of native common law) in the nineteenth century, continues today to demand autonomy for an ethnic group dispersed across Northern Spain and South-West France.

England, meanwhile, has been sluggish in developing a sophisticated regional critique of its own. Part of it has to do with the nation's age: England unified more than a thousand years ago and has thus undergone a millennium of creeping centralisation. It has not, by and large, experienced



a modern crisis – something like, say, the end of Franco Francisco’s dictatorship in Spain in 1975 – that might have precipitated substantial political and constitutional reform. Like Italy, Germany unified only in 1871. Under a revamped modern federal constitution – the ‘Basic Law’ ratified for West Germany in 1949 and retained after reunification in 1990 – German *Länder* (states) enjoy a great deal of autonomy. Despite (in the case of Spain) or perhaps because (in the case of Germany) of their pronounced regional consciousness, these European nations have so far held together, notwithstanding highly sensitive differences in language (Castilian versus Catalanian), religion (Germany’s Lutheran North and Catholic South) and economic activity (as in Italy).

Thanks to its earlier centralization, England’s situation is different, and its lack of regionalism can be explained by the immense power and prosperity of the South on the one hand and the exploitation of a historically apathetic and politically enervated North on the other. As Hazeldine shows us in his revisionist, Northern-centric history of England and Alex Niven notes in *New Model Island: How to Build a Radical Culture Beyond the Idea of England* (2019): ‘the north has been doing badly for a long time – for decades, if not centuries – and a lot of the time, it’s basically sat there and taken it, with a few exceptions.’

The kingdom of Northumbria presented the first real Northern headache for Southern rulers following Aethelstan’s victory over Eric Bloodaxe, the last Viking king of Jórvík, in 954. The Anglo-Saxons never fully assimilated their troublesome new territory to the Wessex system; William I didn’t even bother to try. Instead, the Conqueror’s merciless Harrying of the North (1069–70) put down opposition to the Norman regime through a campaign of slaughter, destruction and scorched-earth brutality that left no settlement inhabited between York and Durham. The historian Richard Muir called it ‘the most fearful genocide in the history of England’. Seventeen years later, the Domesday Book (1086) reported, between a third and half of all villages in the Ridings were still ‘waste’. With the establishment of teaching at Oxford (1096) and Cambridge (1209) and the flourishing of the Inns of Court (from the thirteenth century), the South began to thrive whilst the North remained a hostile militarised zone bordering the kingdom of Scotland, with whom Southern rulers



continually waged war for centuries.

After the failure of the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536), a northern movement in opposition to Henry VIII's break with Rome and the early stages of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer called Northerners 'a certain sort of barbarous and savage people, who were ignorant of and turned away from farming and the good arts of peace, and who were so far utterly unacquainted with knowledge of sacred matters, that they could not bear to hear anything of culture and more gentle civilisation'. The Rising of the North (1569), another Catholic plot, this time attempting to depose Elizabeth I, foundered on a loss of nerve on the part of the earls of Northumberland and Westmorland, leading to yet greater centralisation in the South. By 1599, the Swiss tourist Thomas Platter could claim after visiting the country that:

London is not said to be in England, but rather England to be in London, for England's most resplendent objects may be seen in and around London; so that he who sightsees London and the royal courts in its immediate vicinity may assert, without impertinence, that he is properly acquainted with England.

The synecdochic idea of London-as-England (still prevalent today) was first questioned after the Industrial Revolution, when the North – until then 'an obscure, ill-cultivated swamp', as Friedrich Engels put it in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* (1845) – was transformed, threatening to radically swing the balance of economic power. However, with the acquiescence of Northern industrialists, the Westminster government responded brutally to the Luddite demonstrations (1811), firing at protesters at mills on both sides of the Pennines and hanging twenty-six demonstrators at Chester, Lancaster and York. Eight years later, troops fired on peaceful protesters assembled in St Peter's Field in Manchester to hear Henry Hunt give a speech on parliamentary reform, killing eighteen and wounding more than 600.

The 1832 and 1867 Reform Acts that followed were cruel false dawns. As the Chartist organiser and author James Bronterre O'Brien said: the first

reforms merely ‘united property against poverty’. The Second Reform Act may have doubled the (male) electorate, but in a letter to Karl Marx in 1868, Engels lamented that the Northern ‘the proletariat [...] discredited itself terribly’ by voting for the Tories. ‘Not a single working-class candidate had a ghost of a chance’, Engels said, ‘but my Lord Tomnoddy or any parvenu snob could have the workers’ votes with pleasure’. It would not be the last time Northern turkeys voted for Christmas. As the century wore on, the economic divide widened: the Cotton Famine (1861–65) that devastated the North-West had little effect down South.

In the First World War, Lancashire and Yorkshire supplied nearly a quarter of Kitchener’s armies with men, before rearmament for the Second World War resuscitated Northern heavy industry after the punishing Depression years (when London, of course, enjoyed another property boom). As industrial demand disappeared in 1945, the North was effectively left to rot. Postwar decline reached a head in the 1970s, when Labour chancellor Denis Healey blamed the unions for the 1970s recessions, cut 45,000 jobs in the North and invested the £320 million saved straight into the South. It is no surprise that it was under Margaret Thatcher’s government that the concept of a North–South divide, so often invoked today, first entered the British political vernacular. On 20 November 1980, Conservative MP for Nelson and Colne John Lee told the Commons:

Those of us who represent the regions are increasingly aware of the North–South divide, as twenty-first-century industry is increasingly sucked towards the South-East. [. . .] Unless that trend is positively corrected, we shall in future years need a United Kingdom version of the Brandt report.

Whether Lee knew his Gramsci is doubtful – the title of his autobiography, *How to Make a Million* (2013), suggests not – but he echoes the Italian’s analysis of the parallels between the international inequalities caused by colonialism and the regional disparities within so-called ‘developed’ European nations. Thatcher went on to trigger the 1984–5 miners’ strike by renegeing on a 1974 settlement and cutting 20,000 jobs across twenty

collieries in the North, Scotland, and Wales. Under New Labour, Tony Blair condescended to the regions but it was London that boomed – in 2007, city bankers’ bonuses hit at £11.5 billion amidst yet another property bubble – whilst the gutted post-industrial North lurched into a flaccid service economy based on low-paid call centre, retail, and hospitality work. As London bounced back from the 2007–08 Financial Crisis to enjoy yet another property boom, the North veered alarmingly to the right as Labour’s vote share dropped from 4.1 to 2.6 million. Under the coalition, political snake-oil salesman George Osborne peddled the ‘Northern Powerhouse’, a chimaera designed to distract the region from the fact that transport spending per head under the coalition remained at least double in London compared with the North. During the pandemic, the Tories’ allegiance to their Southern heartlands was made abundantly clear by a divide-and-rule policy that pitted Manchester against Liverpool in the flawed tiered lockdown system of 2020. The publication in January 2022 of the State of the North 2021 report revealed the persistent emptiness of the Conservatives’ ‘levelling up’ rhetoric. Produced by IPPR North, the northern branch of the Institute for Public Policy Research thinktank, the report showed that public investment per head in the five years to 2019/20 was a third higher in London compared with the North. The scrapping of the promised HS2 branch from Birmingham to Leeds and the watering down of proposals for a new high-speed line between Manchester and Leeds leave voters in no doubt where Tory priorities lie.

Hazeldine, taking after Gramsci, calls on the North to wake up to its immense political power. He argues that the shock Brexit referendum result in 2016 was a punishment meted out by the North for more than a decade of Tory-imposed austerity. It is equally plausible that Northern voters were simply gullible enough to believe the bilious Tory press and Dominic Cummings’s perfidious Leave campaign. After all if, as Hazeldine says, ‘the anger that powered [the Leave vote] to victory came from decline’, the North cut its nose off to spite its face given that the EU’s Regional Development Fund invested billions into deprived areas ignored by David Cameron’s government. Nevertheless, Hazeldine is right to point out that the North has finally flexed its political muscle and ‘ought to enjoy exceptional prominence ahead of the next election’ after



the Brexit referendum and the 2019 General Election made it ‘politically salient again’.

Indeed, there are now signs of growing Northern organisation. The foundation of the Northern Independence Party (NIP) in 2020 by former Labour Party activists Evie McGovern and Philip Proudfoot has drawn support for its socialist policies, ‘Free the North’ slogan and promise of secession for the North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, and High Peak regions. ‘We do not live in a normal country’ says Proudfoot in the NIP Manifesto:

We live in the most unfairly centralised nation in the developed world, both economically and politically. The level of inequality between the North and the South is not too different from a country recovering from a civil war.

Such extreme rhetoric – combined with a range of blue-sky promises including a wealth tax, universal basic income, free school meals for all children, massive investment in education and the arts, and a pluricentric governance model based on multiple capital cities – may raise eyebrows. The manifesto is designed to pique the political interest of those on the left, especially Labour voters disaffected by Keir Starmer’s insipid centrism. So far, however, the NIP has failed to make a splash. In the 2021 Hartlepool by-election, the NIP-endorsed candidate Thelma Walker, a former Labour MP for Cole Valley who lost her seat in 2019, received just 250 votes (0.8%) as the Tories pulled off a sixteen point swing to take the seat. In the 2021 local council elections, NIP-approved candidates received the fewest votes of any in Litherland and Derby in Sefton and Pendleton and Charlestown in Salford, with Labour comfortably retaining the seats.

There are some signs of hope. The celebrated success of the Preston Model highlights the power of local ‘community wealth-building’ initiatives and the potential for regional economies to kickstart their own recovery from austerity without waiting for central government. Meanwhile, Andy Burnham’s confrontation with Westminster over Covid-19 relief funds saw the Mayor of Greater Manchester pronounced ‘King in the North’ and his reelection on an increased majority in May 2021 was on the back



of a campaign ‘to adopt a place-first, not party-first approach’. Initiatives such as Transport for the North and a projected North West Mutual (a community bank serving Lancashire, Merseyside and beyond) hint at increased collaboration between local authorities in the North.

Yet, the North is far from monolithic in its outlook and has long maintained intra-regional rivalries that may present barriers to a pan-Northern political consciousness. Historically, economic competition and local football allegiances contributed to a culture of mutual suspicion between Northern cities, especially Manchester and Liverpool. Today, however, political partisanship looms largest. *Beyond the Red Wall* (2020) written by Starmer’s Director of Strategy and Gordon Brown’s former pollster Deborah Mattinson, shows that the bitter division between ‘Red Wallers’ and ‘Urban Remainers’ presents the most formidable obstacle to a united North.

Yet Brexit has also reignited wider British regionalisms, meaning that the North of England represents only a part of a complicated jigsaw of national tensions in the UK. Scotland, in which every council area voted to Remain in 2016, was forced out of the EU thanks to the English Leave vote orchestrated from Westminster. In Wales, a poll in March 2020 found that 39% supported independence, rising to 60% among voters aged eighteen to twenty-four. If contemporary Welsh regionalism is in its infancy, the long history of the Northern Irish independence movement was complicated further by Brexit. Breaking one of the UK’s most sacred political covenants, Boris Johnson’s Conservative government effectively created a border in the Irish Sea, threatening the Good Friday agreement. The result is that two-thirds of voters in Northern Ireland now believe there should be a referendum on the region’s membership of the UK.

For all the complications facing English regionalism, though, there is certainly a gap in the market. The Labour party seems to have lost all desire (never mind hope) of rebuilding the ‘Red Wall’. Starmer is more preoccupied with acquiescing to the South on the one hand and making overtures to centrists and closet conservatives on the other. In a supremely idiotic miscalculation (or act of appalling deception) he wrote for *The S*n* – this is conventionally how people from Merseyside (like me) refer to the newspaper, to signal our opposition to it – after promising he would

not speak to the paper. Such a poor decision instantly tested the trust of Merseyside (one of Labour's few remaining Northern strongholds), which has boycotted the paper since it falsely blamed and smeared football fans in the aftermath of the 1989 Hillsborough tragedy. Starmer's dismissive assessment of Scottish independence as simply the 'wrong debate' has played into the hands of the Scottish National Party, confirming Labour's insensitivity to the importance of regionalism and decentralisation whilst deepening the party's irrelevance in a country in which Edinburgh South remains the sole remaining red dot on the map.

Paul Salveson has recently argued against the current 'dog's dinner of 'combined authorities' which are very poor substitutes for democratically elected and well-resourced regions'. Instead, he advocates for a federal approach, similar to Germany, where the sixteen *Länder* (states) control their own police, parts of education, housing, health, and transport, whilst the federal government takes responsibility for defence and diplomacy, immigration, currency standards, and so on. It may not please the Welsh and Scottish (or indeed the Northern English) nationalists, but a federal model based on regional assemblies with genuine powers has its advantages. Under devolution in an autonomous federal system, cities outside London could grow in importance, potentially rebalancing the UK economy by reducing the distended size, status, and influence of the capital.

The future of the North is far from certain. For most of its history – culminating in the Brexit referendum and the 2019 General Election – it has been singing to the tune of its Westminster overlords. But if it is to have any hope of nurturing a regionalism to match those in Italy, Spain and elsewhere in Europe, the North needs to make its own voice heard.