**Regaining the Future: Temporality and Left Politics**

Since the epochal crisis of neoliberalism in 2008 and the erosion of - left and right - central politics, the global scene has only gotten more tumultuous and unpredictable. Environmental catastrophe closes in on the horizon, and the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed dire inadequacies in welfare systems. The premise of the oft-quoted refrain ‘it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism’ has been unfolding before our eyes as we approach a series of limits in literal ways (Fisher, 2009: 1-12). Despite these world-historic developments, a sober look at the state of political affairs shows that there has not been a substantial shift in the logic of governance that precipitated these conditions. On the contrary, there has been a turn to the right, be it through the resurgent far-right, the centre right’s rightward shift, or the mainstream left’s drift towards the ‘centre’ because of this change in the political centre of gravity. The left has therefore found itself in the peculiar position of defending a decaying status quo from collapse and faces adversity from a right wing that successfully mobilises an ‘anti-establishment’ populism.

This predicament of the left has been further complicated by recent developments. Right wing populism has been prominent across large tracts of the globe, but events in the North Atlantic scene are particularly useful as a weathervane of changes in sentiment. The alarming rise of xenophobia and nationalism was emblazoned in the unexpected result of the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and provoked a corresponding mobilisation of left forces around Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, both seasoned social democratic figures hitherto on the margins of their respective parties. However, this left surge has subsided, with mixed sentiments of confusion, demoralisation, and frustration in its wake. The Corbyn-led British Labour Party, with a stridently left-wing platform, has been decisively defeated in the 2019 general elections. Now led by the nominally ‘non-factional’ Sir Keir Starmer, the party has been undergoing internal strife as its left wing is ostracised, in a way reminiscent of the Tony Blair period. In the US, the highly popular Bernie Sanders campaign has not captured power, but the nature of its ‘defeat’ is also ambiguous. Joe Biden has defeated Trump in a closely contested, dramatic presidential election. This is a victory doubtless facilitated by the economic and humanitarian consequences of the pandemic raging through the country and the pivotal mobilisation of left forces against white supremacy and police brutality, not to mention the general callousness of the incumbent. An outcome of this election, in the US and abroad, is likely to be a complacency on the mainstream left, and a pronounced inclination to treat insurgent socialist movements as an aberration. The deeply rooted aversion to democratic socialism - itself a left-leaning variant of social democracy - in the upper echelons of established social democratic parties, and the erosion of the political centre, thus far caving into its right, combine to show that even modestly redistributive, anti-neoliberal agendas face a steeply uphill battle.

The sidelining of socialism, though now considerably stronger as a political force compared to the first post-1989 decades, can be felt more acutely considering the gravity of the challenges our planet faces. Bold and far-reaching measures are required to address inequality, oppression, and looming environmental and humanitarian disaster, which should, at a minimum, counteract the doctrinal rigidity of neoliberal governance. The thoroughgoing commodification and defunding of public goods such as education and health have decreased their quality and made them more difficult to access, exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities. In the face of financial collapse, the imposition of austerity for the majority and bailouts for the most well-off have been persistent. Such policies have had a heavy toll on public health and social mobility prospects. As a result of the atomising effects of precarious work, the new norm in many jobs once deemed secure and stable, social cohesion and trust have been eroded. This has in turn conditioned a general rise in mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and other afflictions associated with loneliness and desperation - in what may be a landmark decision, the British government has founded a role titled ‘Minister of Loneliness’, a job that austerity has indeed aided in bringing about (Prime Minister’s Office, 2018). In the gentrified, lifelessly homogenous makeup of urban centres, and the surrounding neglected, run-down working-class quarters, one can glance, with a visceral discomfort, the desolate landscapes of really existing capitalism. Unbridled accumulation for its own sake threatens to destabilise organic life as we know it. Populations of the Global South bear the brunt of its devastating impact, along with the consequences of the asymmetrical bonds that bind them to the global capitalist system. Considering this picture, it is unsurprising that policies that go beyond tinkering with the edges of an inherently crisis-prone, exploitative, and inhumane system would be considered outlandish and unattainable at best. For precisely this reason, it is a task for political forces that seek a different future to follow Lenin’s famous injunction ‘one must always try to be as radical as reality itself’ (cited in Miéville, 2007: 17).

The stark discord between the ongoing environmental and social crises, and the lack of a correspondingly transformative political will at the helm of most governments will be the focus of this chapter. In particular, I wish to castigate the dominant tendencies within the left as the culprits of this predicament. I make this case by initially arguing that the neoliberal consensus has gradually eradicated historical temporality and substituted a timeless progression of its own; the *chronos* of homogenous, empty time has overridden the *kairos* of qualitative, transformative temporality. This is followed by a discussion of the political hegemony of the right, wherein I interpret how the right is winning and the left is losing along lines of temporality. I contend that an ontological desire to surpass the neoliberal erasure of history is apparent in the ground-breaking political shifts of the past decade. Moreover, these developments signal a yearning towards a different future, which, due to strategic errors on the left, culminates in its appropriation by right wing forces, recent electoral defeats of the populist right notwithstanding. In sum, this chapter is a call for the left to occupy the future once again and jettison the discursive elements that tie it to a bland, technocratic administration of the decaying present.

*Chronos and Kairos*

It appears that 2020 was the fastest year on record: an acceleration in the rotation of the earth led to a more rapid revolution around the sun, possibly even requiring the subtraction of a leap-second to align atomic clocks with this shift (Rice, 2021). It is not necessary to be aware of this, however, to intuit undulations in the tempo of time with contractions and expansions throughout the year. A pandemic-related confusion and anxiety, in uneasy coexistence with the tedium of quarantined life, has problematised temporality itself. Particularly considering the sometimes drastic difference between the homogenous clock-time of objective temporality and what might be termed ‘lived temporality’ as a psychologically, socially, and politically mediated experience, it is worth asking to what extent, and even whether, the two ‘times’ are related.

The intention behind marking out this distinction is not to relativise the objective ‘arrow’ of time, but to differentiate ‘temporality’ as a qualitatively variegated trajectory ingrained in social reproduction. These qualitative leaps can, at times, culminate in revolutionary moments that Louis Althusser (2005: 211) terms ‘ruptural unity’. The failure of such a condensation to materialise does not mean the absence of its constituents; Even though the pandemic has exacerbated many inequalities, it has also brought about a revisiting of many of the professed tenets of neoliberal governance such as faith in the optimising self-corrective capacity of markets. Contrary to the common reproach that post-capitalist political projects lack a basis across wide swathes of society, it is the frustrations, desires and passions that give rise to unexpected political outcomes that give time a punctuation, whether as a highly individual and visceral feeling of anxious uncertainty, or a collective outpouring of outrage against the exploitation of frontline workers.

The folds in time have exercised philosophical deliberations for millennia, and the question of temporality has gained a renewed urgency with two overlapping developments over the last decades: the totalising victory of neoliberalism, and the various searches beyond this ‘end of history’ in left theory and politics. The pandemic has inflicted a trauma on entrenched political and economic orders, exacerbating a crisis which issues from the gap between the formal temporal subsumption that capitalism imposes on societies, and its real complications. Here the Ancient Greek distinction between quantitative and qualitative times is of particular use. Accordingly, the former, homogenous time of *chronos* refers to the codified time of clocks and calendars, while the latter is the equally fundamental *kairos*, or the *right* time of qualitative opportunity (Smith, 1969). The difference can be explained in simplistic terms as between the point when wine matures and the immediately precedent or subsequent moments; chronos and kairos are not entirely discreet moments, they presume each other’s existence by definition.

The concept of kairos figures more prominently in Christian literature, as in the contemplations of the novelist Madeleine L’Engle (1980: 98) when she writes:

That time which breaks through chronos with a shock of joy, that time we do not recognize while we are experiencing it, but only afterwards, because kairos has nothing to do with chronological time. In kairos we are completely unselfconscious, and yet paradoxically far more real than we can ever be when we’re constantly checking our watches for chronological time. The saint in contemplation, lost to self in the mind of God is in kairos. The artist at work is in kairos. The child at play, totally thrown outside herself in the game, be it building a sand castle or making a daisy chain, is in kairos. In kairos we become what we are called to be as human beings, co-creators with God, touching on the wonder of creation.

It is not necessary to believe in religion to appreciate the point about kairos being made here. As this chapter intends to show, there are real political - and secular - potentials in the concept, understood as a seemingly untimely incursion into the flow of chronological time that carries an irreducibly qualitative element. This can take the shape of vigorous social opposition to the ravages of a dehumanizingly monotonous temporal procession, and indeed does so. By secularising kairos, moreover, it is possible to shed light on those aspects of electrifying political moments that strike the participant and observer alike as other-worldly, but in a manner ‘completely unselfconscious, and yet paradoxically far more real than we can ever be’.

The early twentieth-century Christian existential philosopher Paul Tillich (1936) has provided a of mainstay conception of kairos that also expands the concept’s reach to secular applications. In its religious use, kairos refers to historical moments in which an existential decision leaves a lasting mark on the trajectory of time, the coming of Christ being an example. However, as Tillich also maintains, kairos allows for an understanding of the decisive and contingent factor in historical unfolding, one which involves an intervention of the human subject that not only suspends the past’s overbearing determination on the present, but also uncouples the chronological linearity of the present from the future and creates a space of social and political intervention onto catastrophic normalcy (Asteriti, 2013).

Kairos is irreducibly contingent and ‘accidental’ by nature. Its arrival can be retroactively traced in its chronological trail, yet it registers as an ‘untimely’ intervention, a disparate conjunction of innumerable circumstances that goes against the grain and the envisaged path. It is similarly ‘opportune’ here to remember with Harvey (2010: 174-5) and Ross (2015: 74-5) that Marx also comes to appreciate these apertures in time over the course of his life, especially in his responses to the Paris Commune of 1871. According to Marx (1993: 16-7) a worker-led insurrection for the capture of political power in Paris would be a ‘desperate folly’ since the Prussian enemy was at the gates and the republic should be defended, such that it would be rejuvenated as a social republic with the political sway of working-class representation. However, the development of the Commune as an embryonic form of self-rule by the urban masses would compel Marx to reconsider: Advising caution in line with a long-term vision of the improvement of the republican frame gives way to exuberant support for a fledgling attempt at recovering the means of existence from a parasitic ruling class (Acaroglu, 2018: 9-10). As opposed to waiting for the ‘ripe’ moment as an envisaged stage in the progression of class struggle, the Paris Communards, as Marx (1977: 556-7) would recognise, not only seized but created a kairotic moment through social reproduction would be secured outside of the established order. This experimental audacity was valuable, notwithstanding the short-lived experience of the Commune and its brutal destruction (Horne, 2007: 415).

The Commune had a lasting impact on Marx’s vision of historical change; the initial reception was an exhortation to channel energies into ‘realistic’ avenues of gradual transformation within the state, though as events unfolded this vision of quantitative accumulation and eventual qualitative break was revised. Marx (1968) would then approach the Commune - or history as such taking shape in the moment - as the product of myriad struggles with permanently provisional solutions, a branching out of multiple possibilities and prospective trajectories, and an articulation with an irreducibly ‘accidental’ side wherein ‘accidents’ evolve into prominent causal mechanisms over political deliberations and circumstantial factors. Such accidents include the presence or absence of leading figures and organisations - Blanqui was in prison while the Workingmen’s International, Marx’s affiliation, was a minority faction - as well as the local reverberations of wider geopolitical conflict - the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian war was humiliation and political paralysis of the French state - among other factors.

This experience would also foster a renewed sensitivity to pre-capitalist and indigenous social formations in Marx’s theoretical development. The Commune therefore facilitated a turn away from the Hegel-inspired rigidity of seeing history as a march of modes of production, and towards the kairotic impulses that can arise from the margins of the historical stage, as seen in the various instances of successful socialist initiatives away from the imperial capitalist core in the twentieth century (Acaroglu, 2020). In sum, unexpected turns and watershed moments are not only inherent to history, but they make up the temporal undulations which make such a concept viable. Historiography can falsely assign a predictability with a backward glance, or complacently announce a finality to any given political-economic situation, which is doubly problematic considering the instability at the core of capitalist reproduction. Chronological time carries the fundaments of kairotic breaks in its constitution, and such breaks nourish the chronological flow with kernels of potentiality that may coalesce into new ‘opportune’ moments’.

*Chronological dominance*

What gives *2020* more substantial density as a signifier than other years, as was *2016* before that, lies precisely in this kairoticintervention into the regularity of chronological time embodied in neoliberal, establishmentarian politics. To appreciate the gravity of these moments, it is necessary to glance backwards into the preceding period of the so-called ‘End of History’, the controversial thesis which has certainly been critiqued from myriad angles, not least by its original proponent Francis Fukuyama (1992; 2018). The post-Cold War decades can be generalised as a gradual yet relentless evaporation of passion from mainstream political life[[1]](#footnote-1); this is encapsulated, for instance, in how the Italian political scene, with its once mighty, polarising and ideologically coherent political parties, unceremoniously crumbled at the outset of the 1990s, with all politicians now identified with the post- prefix, be it communist, Christian Democrat, or fascist (Foot, 2018). The totalising and self-referential ideologies of the early twentieth century, the *zeitgeist* of the time proclaimed, were conclusively swept away with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Adaptation to triumphant neoliberalism was the order of the day, with even Gorbachev acknowledging its victory and China embarking on comprehensive market reforms (Harvey, 2005).

Notwithstanding their deeply compromised and stagnant political systems, the vast tracts of *really existing socialism* had manifested a rival political-economic arrangement to the West, and an inspiration to the decolonising Majority World with state-led models of robust development. This bloc compelled social democratic policies throughout the world, not least for fear of the appeal of stable employment and defensibly advanced living standards that it seemed to offer. As such, the dissolution of socialism in this variety removed a major threat to neoliberalism, which had taken root in the West, and created vast new markets and paths to exploitation. These developments led to waning support for transformative political projects on the one hand, and at least passive consent for neoliberal hegemony on the other. Perry Anderson (2000: 17) was correct in identifying neoliberalism, at the risk of overreach, as the ‘most successful ideology in world history’ insofar as it was no longer considered ideological at all, but the default imperative in dealing with economic challenges, especially those it instigated in the first place (Mirowski, 2013).

Situating these developments in a temporal frame, I follow what Reinhart Koselleck (2004: 95) has named a lack of ‘prognostic structure’ in the neoliberal imaginary. In said imaginary, a conceptual matrix indexed to the needs of capital is superimposed onto the complexities of social life, including the myriad factors involved in political decision-making and motivation, not to mention culturally specific dispositions. Public policy is thereby crafted to meet the needs of an enterprising, atomised, and rational individual postulate and the assumptions around the economic behaviour they would display. In this way, the market is seen as coextensive with society as such, which in turn is solely an aggregate of individuals. Slavoj Zizek (2014) cites a former governor of Deutsche Bundesbank, who proclaimed the superiority of the ‘permanent plebiscite of the global market’ to the ‘plebiscite of the ballot box’, effectively displaying the culmination of this approach to society as the market. It follows that the political sensitivities of its members are a superfluous residue of earlier, more primitive times when ideals still mattered. Herein lies the smothering of political energies in market calculus and the prioritisation of a fetishised realm over concrete social needs. This is evident in the persistent obsession with economic growth forecasts that overlook the scores of preventable deaths throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The *concrete* abstraction of the market lays waste to the formerly bustling working-class communities and towns in Northern England, compels millions of people across Europe to homelessness despite the availability of double the amount of houses as there are homeless people, and prolongs a global public health emergency for the sake of profits for pharmaceutical companies (Jones, 2012: 34-7; Gebrekidan and Apuzzo, 2021; Neate, 2014).

It is important to emphasise here that though the neoliberal takeover has been daunting, it would be a mistake to take its advocates’ fetishised and de-historicised presentations of its permanence for granted. This is for the fact that a decades-long intellectual and political struggle, along with the crises that the Keynesian system was facing, promoted its emergence as a recent flare-up of class warfare that has not gone unchallenged. Saad-Filho and Yalman (2010: 1) have identified this element of contestation by situating the basis of neoliberalism on ‘the systematic use of state power to impose, under the veil of 'non-intervention', a hegemonic project of recomposition of capitalist rule in most areas of social life’. This hegemonic project to restore the rule of capital has culminated in the ‘disappearance’ of neoliberalism through its ubiquity. The chronological, ‘neutral’ flow of the time of neoliberal modes of capital accumulation is both the function and product of the (fore)closure of the discussion, let alone enactment, of alternative approaches to regulating economic life - even mildly social democratic ones.

According to Will Davies (2017), the ‘monetisation’ of the future is seen in the diffusion of the technical and financial doxa that masks powerful interests and amounts to a ‘monistic project’. Technical fixes relegated to the inaccessible domain of expert knowledge have recently taken centre stage, as seen in the faith in rapid vaccination as a way to avoid more profound, preventative measures against the Covid-19 pandemic (Soederberg, 2021). This monism can be understood through the homogenous texture of the temporal flow of market ‘self-regulation’, which occasionally needs a nudge (about once a decade), most recently in the form of exorbitant bailouts for failing financial institutions afforded by the twofold blows of austerity and increased taxation across all socioeconomic segments. In a 2019 study, the British Medical Journal calculated that 120 thousand excess deaths since 2012 were attributable to the various policies of the ruling Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in the United Kingdom, especially to the ruthless cuts to public services (Watkins et al., 2019). In 2019, Gillian Keegan, a Conservative Member of Parliament, would coolly dismiss the figure as a mere externality of a ‘hard choice’ which was nonetheless imperative to address a deficit in the budget, displaying the facile and discredited dogma that the public budget resembles that of a household (Novara, 2019; Krugman, 2015).[[2]](#footnote-2) Such assertions efface the responsibilities that accompany political choice, since these are presented as technical inevitabilities dictated by specialist knowledge. In this sense, neoliberal discourse has severely curtailed the realm of political possibility and shrouded itself in the language of technocracy which, as Stiegler has (1998) reminded us, does not denote the power of ‘technicians’ but the situation of technicians being in service of power. Moreover, the domination of such an anaemic doctrine at the upper echelons of political and economic power has greatly facilitated the survival of neoliberalism despite its disastrous consequences, but as will also be shown, fails to satiate the grievances it has caused due precisely to its dispassionate self-presentation.

The interconnected financial, ecological and public health crises of really existing neoliberalism are not solely the manifestations of a predatory and quasi-Victorian incarnation of capitalism. They are intrinsic to the system which espouses accumulation for its own sake, compels expansion into new spaces, and forcefully restructures native societies to create new markets (Marx and Engels, 2012; Wood, 2002). Individual capitalists find themselves counterposed to one another in market competition, and their reach for the ever-receding horizon of value, individually and collectively, drives the system towards socially and environmentally disastrous outcomes (Marx, 2015). This takes place in complex and historically specific ways. Crisis tendencies, particularly that of overproduction, do not issue from the wholesale excess of all goods and services available, but rather develop along the fractures created by the uneven and combined development among various sectors of production (Bedirhanoğlu, 2008: 44). For this reason, crises erupt from a highly diverse variety of triggers depending on natural, social, and historical limits to accumulation and the organic composition of the ruling class. In the case of financialisation, this trigger is generally considered to be the overabundance of sub-prime mortgage loans, which is a symptom of the larger, extraordinary increase in speculation that this mode of accumulation entails (Choonara, 2009; Harman, 2010).

Apart from its localised explanations, the crisis-prone nature of capitalism can be surmised from the basic understanding that infinite production and consumption, fundamental processes which mutually create value, are neither feasible nor sustainable, just as it has been proving to be catastrophic to attempt infinite growth in a world of finite resources. Through the fetishised optic of mainstream economics, however, crises appear to be attributable to fully agential causes such as too much borrowing or spending, by the state or households, which can be corrected to a hypothetically self-regulating status. The intention here is not to dismiss situated explanations of causality, but to reinforce the intrinsically destructive drive behind crises as diverse as 2008, 1974 and 1929. As Simon Clarke has maintained, crises are neither exogenous anomalies to an otherwise functioning market, nor mere adaptations to shifts in the mode of accumulation; Economists’ search for superficial causes is ‘as if a scientist were to deny that the recurrence of the seasons was a natural phenomenon, attributing the return of spring each year to the whim of a supernatural force’ (1994: 8).

The historical materialist preoccupation with revealing the crisis-prone nature of the capitalism has helped to shed light on the two-dimensional temporal colonisation that mainstream political and economic reasoning imposes on societies by drawing attention to the contradictions between the times of capital accumulation and social reproduction. The subsumption of social life under the chronological time of capitalist reproduction portrays world-historic events as contingent issues requiring technical fixes under a self-referential rubric, thereby fetishizing one time over all others. At this point it becomes difficult to assign any qualitative or kairotic distinction to this chronology, which can even stretch the moment of crisis into an ironically indefinite ‘moment’ (Toscano, 2014). Since crises are events which demand a decision, the lack of a comprehensive counteraction to neoliberal crises due to the above reasons stretches them into the fabric of financialised everyday life. Prolonged crises thereby efface kairotic moments within a mould of undifferentiated continuity.

Koselleck (2006: 360; Toscano, 2014: 1025) elaborates an understanding of crisis with roots in Hippocratic medicine, which refers to the critical point over the course of an illness where the patient will either succumb or recover. While avoiding any problematic analogies between the human body and society, being mindful of this conception of crisis helps us to appreciate its excruciating importance and ongoing impact at a deeper level. As *concrete* abstraction, the self-referential logic of capital accumulation subject real livelihoods to hardship, and in so doing creates opportunities to glimpse aspirations for an alternative beyond a monochrome future. The ongoing attempts at temporal closure are symptomatic of the kairotic pressures that always follow the multifaceted crises and inherent contradictions of capitalism.

*Prospects of kairotic resistance*

Marx (1976: 280) describes the prevalent understanding of the spheres of circulation and commodity exchange of his time as an illusory ‘Eden of the innate rights of man’ and the ‘exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham’. Instead, Marx (ibid) lays bare ‘the secret of profit-making’ which entails the alienation and exploitation rendered invisible according to the fetishised understanding of the market as a place where equals meet as buyers and sellers of labour-power. As it turns out, and as working people already know, their position as providers of labour-power, the necessary element of profit-making, is more precarious than presented in hypothetical tableaux of a bargain between rationally self-interested and enterprising individuals. Utilitarian calculations of cost and benefit appear under a wholly different light in consideration of the historical dispossession of the working class from the means to sustain and craft a livelihood. Rather than autonomous and self-contained market actors, workers are compelled to partake in determinate social relations that bind their creative and productive capacities to the whims of capital accumulation (Marx, 1959: 43-4).

Seeing beyond ‘Eden’ requires a recognition of the real struggles that underpin the creative destruction that characterises market creation (Harvey, 2007). Contrary to the Smithian belief in market mechanisms as the fulfilment of human nature, the transition to capitalism was a blood-soaked process which continues to reproduce itself on the back of exploitation and dispossession. As Graeber (2011) has meticulously demonstrated, the narrative of evolution from barter economies to money and debt is deeply flawed: Throughout centuries of anthropological investigation, no evidence has been found of such a process that forms a dogmatic starting point for the dismal science. This narrative furthermore informs facile, inaccurate, and solipsistic justifications of the status quo. However, a glance at the conditions of the inception, and thereafter the continuous reproduction of capitalism reveals, in Balibar’s terms, a temporal gap between the *formal* and *real* subsumption of productive activity. According to Balibar (2015: 270, 297), a non-correspondence between the forces and relations of production sets in motion a tension which could be observed in the initial, *formal* subsumption of the emerging proletariat under the working regime of manufacturing, followed by their more comprehensive and profound *real* subsumption into the social and productive relations this entails.

In this *real* level, the working class, as in E.P. Thompson’s (1963) classic formulation, the working is ‘present in its own making’; the masses of people from many walks of life and socioeconomic background are thrust into an emerging system which transforms lifestyles within the space of a few generations. This is a constant process rather than a singular moment of uprooting since, as the capitalism undergoes traumatic shifts with major social consequences, its concrete abstraction requires adjustment, and at each turn, the wealthy and powerful assert the perennial nature of the latest class composition of society, and assign blame to individuals for not fully assimilating to what we might term their ‘temporal regime’ - a hegemonically sustained social relation to historical time shot through with ruling class power. Thereafter Thompson’s succinct formulation of class as defined by ‘men as they live in their own history’ is subverted - there is only an aggregation of individuals tasked with going through the motions as presaged by their social roles. This erasure of history is therefore a politically motivated process. Once perceived for what it is, the edifice holding together bourgeois society may also face a subterranean revolt. Bearing in mind the conflictual dynamism of capitalist reproduction, this is a constitutive temporal gap between the iron-clad logic of capital accumulation and the real obstacles it encounters as kairotic moments of crisis and rebellion.

The most recent form of capital accumulation takes place as credit-led extraction in various forms such as debt, a key ingredient of financialisation which has reshaped social relations particularly in the Global North. The idealised Eden of market relations belies the lived social relations that manifest recent surges in socioeconomic inequality and indebtedness, two fixtures of social life that are shown to directly correlate with increased rates of mental illness that hit the less well-off the hardest (Macintyre, 2018; Sweet, 2018). Today, this concrete abstraction has reached thorough levels of implementation, partly as a function of the relentless attacks on trade union power which have weakened labour militancy throughout the various laboratories of neoliberalism from the United Kingdom to Turkey (Jaumotte and Buitron, 2015; OECD, 2019). Expanding on the discrepancy between formal equality and real expropriation, Marx (1976: 280) illustrated the workings of the sphere of exchange thus:

He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but - a tanning.

The resonances with our moment are remarkable. In the expanding gig economy, the same relation takes place between the nominally ‘self-employed’ delivery driver who has had to take a second job to look after their family and afford rent, or a retail worker on a zero-hour contract anxious to pay for their college education, while the ‘money-owner’ strides out front as the financialised employer and a primary shareholder. Furthermore, as the commodified relation described above ingrains itself in social life, it blends into the background of chronological time.

This predicament has a history worth considering, such that we may establish its transience, as was the preceding stage of relative welfare. Across the recent past there are flashes of moment that call out for decisions and are seized on by the political representatives of privileged interests. As such, the financialised present was neither inevitable, and nor is insuperable. It has rather come to be because of a failure of the left from seizing the initiative, and crucially, due to the assumption of the role of safeguarding a status quo widely recognised to be in decay. Following another crisis in profitability in the 1970s, social democratic and conservative governments alike announced that they could no longer afford welfare, concessions to organised labour, or full employment; Holloway (1990: 33) notes that a few years prior to Thatcher’s rise from being a fringe Hayekian to leader of the Conservative Party, it was prime minister James Callaghan of the Labour Party who formally announced a departure from Keynesian principles. As Holloway (ibid: 17, 33) continues, the adoption of monetary policies and neoliberal priorities opened an ‘abyss’ following an exceptional period of relative prosperity, which stands out with increasing contrast as an aberration to the chaotic and socially murderous history of capitalism (Engels, 1987).

The 1970s was a turning point that inaugurated the dismantlement of the social democratic compact between labour, capital, and the state, in waves of financial deregulation and economic liberalisation that reached the most remote shores in the visible hands of transnational financial institutions and imperialist pressure. The New Right and its toxic infusion of neoliberal and neoconservative policies was now on the rise without an end in sight, both within the wider ecology of right-wing politics and at the helm of governments across the world such as in Chile and Turkey. In these examples, Hayek’s own principle of ‘market freedom’ against democracy, even in its hollow liberal form, was enacted with utmost precision through military dictatorships with Western support. Thus, the New Right distinguished itself in that unlike the post-war right, there would be no pretention to respect liberal principles of equality before the law or the right to political organisation, let alone the social right to a dignified livelihood. An abyss, therefore, had indeed opened once again in the geographies of capitalism, and the seeds of the present germinated in this widening rift between the wealthy and the poor. However, one important revision might be made to Holloway’s description since, while correctly identifying how class conflict was once again waged openly at this juncture, the ‘abyss’ between mainstream political parties, if there ever had been one, began to close around a shared faith in the lack of alternatives and the singularly neoliberal way to go forward.

Davies (2016: 124-7) characterises 1979-1989 as the ‘combative’ phase of neoliberalism, when the threat of socialism, though by now a dim prospect, was still a concern and useful bogeyman. Neoliberals recognised the potentials of organised labour reconstituting itself in the wake of the 1970s and would not shy away from violent confrontations with trade unions, such as those of the miners in the UK. Anti-inflationary monetarist policies would drive up unemployment and further weaken organised labour, an objective that one of Thatcher’s advisors would confess to having at the time (Trilling, 2010: 126). In sum, the proponents of the New Right advocated neoliberalism with an ostensible goal of curtailing ‘the state’, which was more of a euphemism for weaponizing the state as a tool of further wealth transfer and extraction from the toiling majority, while removing any residual mechanism of democratic redistribution. Moreover, the states repressive capacities were bolstered in line with this goal, and it was now endowed with a direct role in the struggle against deviations from free-market fundamentalism. This combative phase preceded the neoliberal complacency as ‘the only game in town’ that would solidify over the following decades. There was an awareness on this side of the political divide that historical development emerging out of the decade could take several forms, evidenced not least by the still-recent relative irrelevance of neoliberalism itself as a marginal intellectual current. Consequently, as a contender for the dominant mode of monetary governance, neoliberalism took shape over a series of kairotic moments in which it exploited the opportune moments to steer government and society away from a faltering social democratic consensus.

This period of emboldened neoliberalism coincides with demoralisation on the left, as the reverberations of 1968 would not result in a political revolution nor any radical alteration to class dynamics (Wilson, 1969: 539). As Wood (1986: 182) notes, the prominent spokespeople of the New Right were not squeamish about expressing the class-based nature of their political project and turned away from the ‘one-nation’ rhetoric of an economy that delivers for all social strata, all the while the theoretical sway of deconstructionist and post-Marxist approaches, the latter spearheaded by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), were announcing the expiry of class as the pillar of left strategy. The long-term transformation of the industrial working class - in subjective terms of political organisation and in objective terms as partial deindustrialisation - of Western Europe was prompting rushed conclusions of ‘post-industrial society’ and facilitating this turn away from class as a viable sociological category (Touraine, 1971).

Deindustrialisation, as Callinicos (1990: 121-5) has stated, has been a relative change since the absolute number of industrial workers, particularly on the global scale, has decisively increased, while only their position relative to the service sector has declined in the Global North. That said, globalisation has gradually eroded the bases of the social democratic strongholds in the capitalist core. This has not happened solely through the anti-union legislation and repression of the neoliberal right, but also as a function of deindustrialisation in areas where working class communities had taken root, wherein societies had coalesced around labour organisation as well as shared values and prioritised which fostered solidarity and companionship outside of work. In a nutshell, a typical mining community in Northern England, for instance, gradually but decisively ceased to be composed of ‘miners’ or ‘community’ as jobs disappeared to far-flung corners of the world while urban centres were left to decay due to willful neglect. Now workers faced each other as precarious employees in competition with another for woefully underpaid jobs a la warehouse labour for companies such as Sports Direct, and also witnessed the influxes of migrant workers who, having arrived in search of opportunities, seemed to jeopardise their prospects, a worry enflamed and stoked by successive governments and the establishment media. Thus neoliberalism created pockets of destitution, lack of political organisation, and ethnic and religious social strife throughout the world, conditions which have proven repeatedly to be veritable enablers of far-right resurgence, which stands before us as a rehabilitated force.

*Reclaiming the future*

Rather than engender a new beginning, the post-1989 landscape was marked by what may be termed a ‘residuality’, wherein the detritus of the century was processed through the new normalcy. Former affiliations were shed and political parties, most of all on those on the left, adapted themselves to a world of no alternatives. Social democratic parties began to mimic the xenophobic right and partook in the felling of social assistance programs. Having already relinquished even a nominal commitment to a classless society in the previous decades, the mainstream left could barely disguise its lack of initiatives under pathologically overblown assertions of its ‘newness’. Further left than social democracy, the situation was not more promising. Melancholy was a dominant fixture of the post-1989 left; self-inquisition - and even self-mutilation, in the case of the once formidable Italian Communist Party (Raith, 2021) - and opposition came to replace critique and construction following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Opposition to globalisation was strident among the besieged extra-parliamentary left, while in government left parties took on new roles as the steadfast administrators of these flows. Social democratic governments could pursue neoliberal programmes with more zeal than their more pragmatically-minded right-wing counterparts: In Italy, a Berlusconi government in Italy could occasionally take the spending route to buoy up support, while left governments pursued privatisation more consistently, and in the UK, the Labour government of Tony Blair decided to introduce tuition fees for higher education, a move opposed by the Conservative Party who pledged to reintroduce free education at the time (Foot, 2018; Alley and Smith, 2004). In keeping with the ‘residual’ nature of much of political contestation at the time, the left thereby underwent a shift from its steadfast focus on ‘redistribution’ to carving out zones of ‘recognition’ within the established system (Fraser, 1995).

This process was doubtless a long time in the making. Successive post-war generations were exasperated with many communist parties’ blind spots around the new battle lines that were being drawn. Also, guided by the Soviet Union and with limited - albeit sometimes significant - levels of autonomy, the communists could counsel caution and restraint at critical moments of social conflict. With the proviso that this refers mainly to the contexts where legality was achieved, communists seldom took initiative to mobilise outside parliamentary channels, and often treated other left forces who did as a danger to their hegemony on the left. Social democratic parties, on the other hand, had consecrated themselves as parties loyal to NATO and wedded to anti-communism. This entitled them to less obstruction and even preferential treatment in formal political life but also distanced them further than communist parties from the emerging New Left which sought to navigate a transformative left position between social democracy and Soviet-style socialism. The results were electorally unimpressive but theoretically provocative as Western Marxism flourished as a formidable body of theoretical work at a remove from quotidian political life; Althusser directly referred his work a ‘detour of theory’ as an itinerary of radical inquiry autonomous from political life, aimed to return to politics with a sharper strategic arsenal (Elliot, 2006). This fragmentation within the left would undermine its reputation throughout the 1980s as a credible force that could change the neoliberal track, now being firmly laid out into the future. Notwithstanding their popularity throughout their tenures, the hopeful leaderships of figures such as Enrico Berlinguer and Francois Mitterand were among the final echoes of the kairotic ambitions of the early twentieth century; the former would be overshadowed by the ultimately disgraced socialist leader Bettino Craxi, friend to a younger controversial real estate salesman by the name of Berlusconi, and the latter would renege on the strident social democratic line he advocated for in his presidential campaign (Lyman, 2011; Brunet, 2017).

In keeping with the Italian examples, the adaptation to the post-Cold War climate of thawing political divides took place seamlessly, as the communist option vanished and reformist socialism had shed itself of Marxist credentials long ago. Following the erasure of alternatives was the rise of ‘betterers’ - (*miglioristi*); the former Italian president and European Union technocrat Georgio Napolitano emerged from the ranks of the right wing of the Italian Communist Party. And better they did, except it was neoliberal governance that they ‘improved’ and optimised as the dominant policy direction. In the meantime, social and economic inequality soared along with precariously employed impoverishment, due to the tenacious insistence on monetary discipline for the working many and lavish bailouts and wealth transfers for the rich and powerful few.

As it turns out, the new normalcy was not long-lived, and gave rise to trenchant criticisms in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, which laid bare the undependable and extractive nature of credit-led capital accumulation. The left was caught on the back foot, but not necessarily due to its political irrelevance. On the contrary, social democracy underwent a period of remarkable success as a bedrock political force throughout the 1990s, with twelve out of fifteen European Union countries ruled by a social democratic government or coalition (Downes and Chan, 2018). By 2006, however, this number had fallen to fewer than five (McCrone and Keating, 2015). Laclau (2005: 86-88) once drew attention to the striking change in political preference among working-class areas in France, wherein the ‘protest vote’ dramatically shifted from the Communist Party to the far-right National Front led by the notorious Holocaust denier Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose daughter has given the party a ‘respectable’ face lift in the ensuing decades. This was a microcosm of what would gradually take place throughout the continent and elsewhere. By 2017, the electoral fortunes of social democratic parties had all but dwindled (Henley, 2017). The paradigmatic example was the Greek centre-left party PASOK, whose vote share crumbled from 43.9% in 2009 to a pitiful 6.3% just six years later, a process now referred to as ‘Pasokification’ (ibid). Having boasted of ‘bettering’ the neoliberal status quo, the mainstream left could not credibly distance itself from the fallout of its implosion.

The 2017 French presidential contest is a telling example of a contrary trend. Building on the gains of the 1990s surge in support for the National Front (NF) - now National Rally - Marine Le Pen’s anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic party has established itself as a major political party in France. Le Pen faced the ex-socialist ‘centrist’ candidate Macron in the run-off to a closely contested initial round, wherein the vote was divided nearly evenly between the far-right, centre-right, ‘centrist’, and far-left candidates. An initial observation is that ‘centrism’ has been common currency in recent political discourse, a seemingly innocuous term loaded with a normative assumption of its superiority as the ‘reasonable’ centre or happy medium. The implication here is that the neoliberal edifice, even as it has fallen apart, continues to exercise a hegemonic control over discussions of what is ‘sensible’ and conflates the ‘irresponsible’ extremes at the edges of the spectrum, a deeply entrenched liberal stratagem. Consequently, deviations from neoliberalism register as reckless plunges into the dark recesses of the last century, even though the advocates of neoliberalism themselves tend to avoid using the designation. It is also unsurprising that the adamant voice of ‘centrism’, or neoliberal orthodoxy, cut his teeth in the dilapidated Socialist Party before founding his own party, yet his success could not be emulated with ease, as a UK cross-party faction led by an ex-Labour MP was to discover shortly afterwards.

Additionally, as a reminder of its neo-fascist heritage, some of Le Pen’s supporters have seen her party as a political force beyond left and right, further muddling the political spectrum and positioning the far-right as a defiant movement against globalisation and its conspiratorial and corrupt enforcers on the left and right (Stothard, 2017). Considering the grain of twisted truth in the argument that, as outline above, mainstream politics has indeed found slightly too much middle-ground, as it were, this is an utterly sinister and serious warning that a significant section of French society, and societies around the world, feel left behind and hard done by due to neoliberalism. Le Pen lost in the run-off by a very wide margin (BBC, 2017). This was doubtlessly facilitated by an increased vigilance among the electorate after the shocking victory of Donald Trump in the US elections. However, the areas where support for was particularly strong were those that experienced higher levels of unemployment, signalling that apportioning blame to immigration, one beneficial aspect of globalisation, along with lip service to increased spending and job creation, could be inspirational (Aisch et al., 2017). The discontent here, as elsewhere, has roots in the concrete abstraction of the homogenous neoliberal temporal space. The resurfacing far-right follows its predecessors in its appeal to a deeply reactionary anti-modernist corollary, invoking images of regained national grandeur and importantly, a semblance of a kairotic break from the uninspiring tedium of existing neoliberalism.

The demise of social democracy, as discussed in various contexts, arrived at an emblematic yet perplexing conclusion in the UK. The Tony Blair-led Labour Party dropped class entirely from its rhetoric and embraced Thatcherite principles particularly vis-à-vis the economy. The party entered government and remained there, complete with its own organic intellectuals and consecutively striking electoral successes that persisted despite the highly unpopular invasion of Iraq (Audickas et al., 2020). Despite gaining power repeatedly from the 1997 election until 2010, the Labour share of the vote was in consistent decline, a trend that became more noticeable after the 2015 loss and most notoriously the disastrous defeat of 2019 (ibid). As a matter of fact, the UK - notwithstanding its endemic brand of exceptionalism - was not a singular success story gone awry. As we have seen, social democracy has been in constant decline for decades, a process that also befell, for instance, the Social Democratic Party of Germany that also took on an openly market-friendly orientation and enjoyed power with consistently lower returns as the brief boom of the 1990s slowly extinguished (The Economist, 2016).

What has remained of social democracy, it would seem, is a dim flicker of a century-old commitment to a kinder society that affords every one of its members a dignified livelihood. Except, to return to the slow disintegration of the Labour Party in recent decades, the unexpected election of Jeremy Corbyn to leadership was a moment of literal rejuvenation and massive expansion for the party (Audickas et al., 2019). Corbyn was a veteran MP and a ‘backbencher’ notorious for his defiant stance over decades in political life, especially recognised for his vociferous opposition to the Iraq War. This profile and record as an unwavering asset of the left wing of the party encouraged a surge in membership of hundreds of thousands, some re-joining the party after a period of disillusionment, but the majority coming from younger generations (Whiteley, et al., 2019). The younger, more urban-based profile of the party reflected the aspirations of a generation for an end to politicians and parties of various stripes that only have more of the same to promise. They also reflected, as Whiteley et al.’s research findings suggest, an increasingly common sight in neoliberal times - well-educated and left behind young people, who were entering the ranks of the working class saddled with debt and with little opportunity to afford a secure livelihood (2019). Against the backdrop of a well-documented drop in party membership and voter turnout, this was an even more striking surge for a party assumed irredeemable by many (Dalton, 2005; Heidar, 2006; Van Biezen et al., 2012).

In 2017, the Conservative prime minister Theresa May decided to call a snap election with hopes of gaining a stronger majority in parliament as well as to secure her leadership of the party, destabilised by an emboldened Eurosceptic right-wing following the surprising result of the Brexit referendum. Though her party emerged victorious, this was an ambiguous win for two reasons: The Conservatives were now compelled to court a far-right Northern Irish party to secure their government, and the Corbyn-led Labour Party recorded an unexpected improvement. While still coming in second, the party would increase its vote share of 31.2% in 2015 to 41% in the midst of bitter intra-party disputes, and as an analysis of marginal seats has revealed, came within touching distance to forming a coalition (Audickas, 2019: 14; Agerholm, 2017). A key difference at this time was a manifesto that pledged measures to reel in financial speculation, reintroduce maintenance grants and abolish tuition fees, along with renationalisations and widened public ownership in the economy (Labour Party, 2017: 16, 43, 19). Importantly, the party stated clearly that it would respect the ‘Leave’ outcome of the Brexit referendum, and emphasised a departure from the European Union (EU) that would protect workers’ rights and environmental standards, and put the parliament at a more prominent and sovereign position in the negotiations, decisions that was later revised with devastating results (ibid: 24-7).

Brexit marks the first contraction of the EU and a turning point in the regional organisation, the implications of which will become clearer with the passage of time. Though potentially putting a chink in the armour of the neoliberal chronology embedded in transnational body, the historical context of the Brexit referendum suggests a miscalculation by the pro-EU Conservative leader of the time, David Cameron, in order to marginalise the Eurosceptics in his party. In a leaked speech in 2015, Corbyn had correctly identified the line of reasoning behind a prospective referendum: ‘a cynical, opportunistic ploy to try and win back anti-EU votes that had switched from Tories to Ukip’ (cited in Hertner and Keith, 2017). This characteristic of the referendum has indeed given it a regressive character that could further deregulate the economy and put the UK in a greatly more vulnerable position before multinational corporations, particularly those of US origin.

The dominant framing of the prospect of leaving the EU exploited the aforementioned social strife within working class communities. Nigel Farage, a chief spokesperson of the Leave campaign, wrongly claimed that immigration into the UK was an EU imposition and at ‘breaking point’, enflaming misdirected anger against vulnerable populations (Stewart and Mason, 2016). Farage would also falsely allege that Turkey, whose candidacy has been shaky at best throughout the last decade, was going to join the union imminently, and propel a mass exodus of Turkish migrants who, according to Farage’s United Kingdom Independence Party, invariably sympathised with the perspectives of their government (UKIP, 2016). Consequently, the referendum put progressive politics at a bind. A decision to leave would embolden the xenophobic far right inside and outside parliament and encourage more draconian anti-immigration laws. Remaining, on the other hand, may simply delay the moment of decision regarding the future of the Troika (European Central Bank, EU, and the IMF) and the unsustainable levels of austerity that it imposes across Eurozone countries. Remaining would also forestall the possibility of breaking from the confines of the EU in line with a left program, a consideration with crucial implications for any current with an anti-austerity agenda, as the Greek example would testify (Lapavitsas, 2012; Varoufakis, 2017).

This situation was further confounded by an apparent confusion of roles. The Labour Party has had a long tradition of Euroscepticism, including a commitment to withdraw from the European Economic Community without a referendum in their 1983 manifesto, at a time when socialism was still considered a goal across the various tendencies within the party (Hickson and Miles, 2018). This approach within British social democracy was sidelined as socialism also receded from the horizon, and Jeremy Corbyn, after becoming leader, half-heartedly announced that he would support the Remain campaign in 2016. Across the aisle, the right-wing Eurosceptic camp, displaying an unapologetic nativism and imperial nostalgia, clung to the opportunity of leaving the EU as a way of securing their domination of the Conservative Party, and by extension, the government. Boris Johnson, the leader who replaced Theresa May, has catered to this wing, and overseen its diffusion towards the front benches. In fact, the single seat that Labour gained from the Conservatives in the 2019 elections was Putney, the London constituency whose incumbent MP, a pro-EU Conservative, was dismissed by Johnson (BBC, 2019; Menendez, 2019).

The marginalisation and silence of left Euroscepticism - a slightly misleading term as it suggests a synonymity between the EU and ‘Europe’ - is a local manifestation of the shift in the role of the left towards the responsible administration of the status quo, while the flagrant far right articulates an anti-establishment discourse. In this way, even the party of the ruling elite, which receives more donations from deceased wealthy donors than people alive, can portray itself as the voice of a silent majority. The Conservative Party, having turned further right in order to deny support for its rivals on this side and dominated the executive for a decade, manages to portray itself as an intransigent actor for change as a result of the left’s unwillingness and incapacity to envision the alternative societies beyond the current impasse. This was recently demonstrated through the heavy defeat inflicted on the Labour Party in the 2019 election. The party maintained and improved upon the manifesto promises which now included a universal public broadband infrastructure, a policy that was ridiculed before its necessity has been understood over the last year of quarantine (Walker, Syal, Stewart, 2019). However, this was a Brexit election, and the party’s position on the issue was notoriously unclear - there was deep set internal division and a promise of a second referendum, which became, despite his best efforts at avoidance, the red herring of the entire Labour Party platform. Corbyn was compelled to reveal his stance on the question, to which he begrudgingly responded as ‘neutral’ in the last weeks prior to election day (Stewart and Walker, 2019). The main dynamic of the election was a mass defection from the party by people who voted for it in 2017, citing both the leadership of Corbyn and the lack of a clear Brexit stance as their reasons (Curtis, 2019). Upon closer inspection, defectors were estranged from Corbyn personally, but not necessarily the policies, and those that gave reasons for their dislike of Corbyn tended, once again, to refer to the Brexit question (ibid).

Yanis Varoufakis, the former finance minister of Greece, commented that his thorough research and well-reasoned arguments for debt restructuring fell on deaf ears when he travelled to Berlin and Brussels with a clear debt renegotiation mandate. Even when he could find an audience, Varoufakis (2017) quipped, ‘[he] might as well have been singing the Swedish national anthem’ as his explanations were ignored, and responses were irrelevant. This is a telling example of the void at the heart of neoliberal political economy, as an increasingly technocratic and anti-democratic articulated structure led by capital in an abstract, financialised guise. The EU, for the most part, fails to arouse the passion that was evacuated from mainstream politics partially because of its own appropriation of monetary sovereignty from its European citizenry. The ‘combative’ phase has been left far behind as neoliberalism has foisted a congealed temporality onto societies. This self-referential and inaccessible matrix prevents it from even engaging in an agonistic struggle with rival conceptions of society, in a display of indifference among its personal interface in organisations such as the EU. As though an algorithmic error, the architecture of neoliberal chronological temporality cannot compute deviations, a sign of the absence of any popular elements in its formulation which allows it to plan next steps without regard for social and individual health and wellbeing. This goes to show how, in sight of this unresponsive regime of capital-extraction, even the misguided glimmer of a kairotic bump in the road of its proliferation can mobilise passions for a change of track. As per Koselleck’s definition of crises as moments demanding a decision, the prolonged Brexit moment also called for bold action at a liminally precarious and potentially kairotic moment. The lack of a decision was a therefore a decision in itself, and one that cast a blinding shadow onto a comprehensive strategy to build a more humane welfare system out of the detritus.

Following the unexpected result of the Brexit referendum, there was a palpable sense of anxiety in the run-up to the US presidential election in the same year. Chronological homogeneity had been disturbed, and the Trump campaign, considered an outlandish joke a year prior, had gathered considerable momentum with its candidate securing the Republican nomination. Fitting the emerging pattern of contests between the populist far-right and technocratic neoliberalism, this election was contested between the uncouth, racist and misogynistic Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, a figure at the centre of US political life in various roles over the last three decades.

The Trump campaign, in a similar way to the Le Pen strategy that would follow, engaged in abrasively xenophobic fearmongering, and promised economic revival to the dilapidated former industrial hubs of the Rust Belt (Scheyder, Brown, and Lange, 2020). A simple narrative provided a blueprint of the troubles that working people were going through, especially in the former Democratic strongholds of the Midwest, and invoked the culprits for the losses of industrial jobs as the Democratic establishment and social base congregated in coastal, urban areas, also adding looming and mainly imaginary foreign threats (Wypijewski, 2017). It is not surprising that this campaign would strike a chord in neglected parts of the country, as it obliquely appealed to those fallen behind along with vaguely implicating the beneficiaries of neoliberalism in financialised metropolitan centres (Longworth, 2016). While Clinton gave expensive and publicised speeches to wealthy backers, Trump traversed the crucial, lower-income and racially homogenous rust belt states with lower life expectancy and flatlined social mobility, and was rewarded handsomely for it (ibid; Keith, 2016; Diego-Rosell and Rothwell, 2016).

Regardless of its inaccuracy, the Trump campaign articulated a narrative with heroes and villains and pushed the left to a defensive position by appropriating the hope for a different future from the working masses, including his own voters among their ranks. In a by now familiar turn of events, the ‘left’ as a whole was conflated with the centre-left wardens of neoliberal business-as-usual, which was and is an untenable role in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. Trump’s narrative doubtlessly drew most of its strength from the misogyny and racism that permeated the airwaves of his constituencies for decades. However, this is a woefully incomplete explanation of his success since the campaign mobilised affective drives in combination with the rhetoric of socioeconomic injustice and need for change, change that was not going to be found by opting for the Democratic Party after its opportunity in power for eight years. The power of the Trump narrative also derived from its sheer novelty and the promise of change; after the Obama administration failed to live up to its promises in the rural backwaters - and Flint, Michigan - after coming to power on a mandate of ‘change’, its perverse, reactionary reflection on the right assumed the mantle.

The world would once again hold its breath in the 2020 presidential election, where the Democratic Party nominated possibly the only candidate that could have been as disastrous as Clinton without being Clinton herself. Joe Biden ascended to the candidacy following a dramatic primary process that involved an unexpected endorsement from the left-leaning candidate Elizabeth Warren, fears of former New York City mayor and billionaire Michael Bloomberg effectively purchasing the nomination, and the iconic social democrat Bernie Sanders being the last to concede defeat, having had a stroke at an early stage which put his otherwise spectacular bid in jeopardy, all against the backdrop of a pandemic that ripped through the population with tragic casualties (Gambino, 2020).

In 2019, Joe Biden had assured wealthy donors that if he was to be elected, they would not be made a target due to their wealth, their lifestyles could remain the same, and that ‘nothing will fundamentally change’ (Derysh, 2019). This was shortly after attending a forum organised by the Poor People’s Campaign, a clergy-led initiative for the discussion of poverty and systemic racism founded by Martin Luther King (Lockhart, 2019). Biden’s message here was not significantly different: having mainly addressed his speeches towards a fictional ‘middle-class’ interlocutor, Biden called for working with the Republicans to find solutions to poverty and asserted that he could ‘convince’ them to work together, a speech that would be criticised by Sanders and Warren at the same event (ibid). The person of Biden, as was Clinton before him, is a stand-in for the outdated belief that the events of 2016 were not precipitated by the system of socioeconomic inequality that they optimised for decades, but an external aberration. This is apparent in the assumption that the system can be made to function for the benefit of all classes, which are really one large ‘middle class’ in the US establishment imaginary, when in reality this ‘class’ has been gradually hollowed out and proletarianized over the last decades (Erickson, 2014). Along with this effusive middle class, the neoliberal imaginary continues to fantasize of cross-party collaboration and compromise, which, if possible, could only take place as a rightward shift of the centre-left parties, whose hegemony would thus be solidified. Through this fetishised optic, it is hard for the centre-left to appreciate the gravity of the situation where an entire mode of capital-accumulation is hollowing itself out and only remaining afloat by postponing the reckoning into its flattened temporality. It was precisely this realisation that aided the victory of Biden in the 2020 election, rather than an appeal to ‘sensibility’ and collaboration, since the grit and determination of the US left, particularly the Black Lives Matter movement, ensured turnout to deny Trump a second win. Thus, along with a deep recession and pandemic, the election was a referendum on the Trump administration and its supports within the regressive, neo-fascist corners of American society.

The above analysis across three cases that display unmistakable similarities reveals that kairotic impulses accompany every turn of capitalist reproduction and burst at the seams where the frustration and anger of exploitation and oppression cannot be contained. The temptation might be to describe Brexit and Trump as qualitative, kairotic breaks from the chronological and empty time of neoliberalism, even if in a distorted way. However, having demonstrated that these developments have been generated by, and contribute to, the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism, it would not be correct to grant this designation to such events. They are still internal to the system and its cycles of neoliberalism with a human face and authoritarian right-wing populism that voters have had to choose in many recent elections. To grasp what is meant by kairotic breaks, it would be more appropriate to consider the struggles of the South American left, for instance, which mobilises from the indigenous and working-class grassroots to challenge capitalism and imperialism with an endlessly jubilant force. Or it would be more opportune to consider the near-euphoric aura that surrounded the 2017 general election in the UK, which, despite being a loss, had the trappings of an eventual, more grounded victory with reverberations across the world had the left kept its nerve.

The consequences of the 2008 financial crash have now melded with a pandemic-induced recession. Indebtedness does not show signs of abating while unemployment is on the rise everywhere. The wealth of the global elite has increased alongside these developments to even more exorbitant levels, reaching numbers that are orders of magnitude higher than even millionaires can conceptualise (Neate, 2020). Obscene levels of inequality and precarity are similar to festering wounds that call out for a decision. While the Biden presidency has shown some signs of collaboration with the left wing of the party, it should be borne in mind without a radical programme rivalling the far-right, a threat that has not been staved off, the left is wasting precious time until the emergence of the next, possibly more articulate, and competent Trump (Meadway, 2021).

*Conclusion*

Qualitative and quantitative times have intertwined themselves in the political scene, bringing new actors to the centre and mercilessly disposing of age-old parties and institutions. This chapter has attempted to explain that the latter has characterised the neoliberal absorption of all historical events within its matrix of financialised calculus, making it effective at challenging alternative imaginaries of the future, but failing to satiate the grievances of those left behind with a coherent narrative. I have seized on this point to argue that as socioeconomic inequality, stress and anxiety in the face of a punitive post-2008 economic regime have been increasing, so have popular aspirations for transitions beyond the extended present. While there is some evidence of this in the examples of socialist policies regaining popularity, the (far) right has enjoyed important electoral successes insofar as it could provide an alternative narrative and future.

The political timidity of mainstream left parties, despite signs that the contrary attitude is the other of the day, have ceded the terrain of alternative futures to the right, and this has alarming implications for progressive politics everywhere. In sum, the discourse of responsible technocracy should be abandoned, and the left should regain the future. A kairotic rift polarises political systems throughout the world. The choice between socialism and barbarism becomes clearer with each passing month and year. This has been apparent, for instance, in the binary opposition of two potential ‘Brexits’, as well as a prospective Greek rupture from the Eurozone, again mainly supported by the far-left and far-right. Hillary Clinton’s obscenely expensive speeches to Wall Street were vigorously criticised by two figures, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. The left should recognise this rift for what it is and take the plunge as the natural and historical limits have been strained for too long. This is necessary not just at the grassroots level of building solidarity and mutual aid, but also as an electoral strategy which advances a bold vision; if the last two decades have proven something, it is that a bad vision is better than no vision. The power of a coherent narrative that detaches itself from the insipid temporal regime of neoliberalism is crucial to any left reappropriation of the hopeful future from the far-right. In fact, the future continues to be, in Srnicek and Williams’ (2015: 141) words, the ‘natural habitat’ of the left, as the instigator of kairotic potential from within the global working masses who build life from ground up every day.

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1. Of course, generalisations should not occlude our view of instances of defiance on the global scene, such as the rise of the Zapatista movement in Mexico. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It should also be noted that this ‘justification’ for austerity resulted from a political decision to transfer banking debts to government balance sheets (Davies, 2016: 130). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)