

Brexit as Britain in Decline and its Crises (Revisited)

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Abstract

In this paper we revisit Gamble's book 'Britain in Decline' and in doing so also revisit the geographies of state crisis. Drawing on the substantial archives of state theory, we explore how Brexit emerged as a moment of crisis following the relative decline of the economy and the reshaping of the welfare state. Discussions of Brexit and the uneven geographies of advanced capitalism inevitably raise questions about the central tension between the free market and strong state within both political discourse and political activity. In considering these, we extend Gamble's writing on the social, economic and political struggles within the Thatcherite project and explore the role of uneven development in perpetuating and transforming the contradictions of advanced capitalism. This enables a more geographical reading of contradictions inside the state-territory, which augments Gamble's understanding of the external challenges to Britain's post-war settlement.

Keywords: Brexit; contradictions of capitalism; crisis; neoliberalism; Thatcherism; uneven development

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Introduction

In his book 'Britain in Decline: Economic Policy, Political Strategy and the British State,' Andrew Gamble makes a clear and convincing argument that a narrative of decline redefined the economic and other challenges facing Britain in the late 1970s and provided a starting point for Thatcherism.¹ Whether there had been a decline was not his key focus or concern, rather it was the perception of Britain's weakened status as a world power and a national economy, and the political struggles over how to reverse that 'decline' that he sought to delineate. The effect was to vividly illuminate the broader context of domestic debates (on national efficiency, modernisation, and social democracy). Through an attention to discourse, Gamble detailed the proliferation of predominantly negative ideas about Britain, and how the nation's framing as the "sick man of Europe" on account of its low rates of capital investment and labour productivity, as well as strained industrial relations, was critical in redefining the very nature of 'the political' at this moment in time. The political, we take from Gamble, includes the institutions, practices, boundaries and perceived responsibilities of the state. As such, Gamble's book also provided an important basis for critical work on the Thatcher settlement as a means to transcend the problems and contradictions emergent from the post-war consensus, which had been shaped by the Keynesian conviction that the role of government was to counter the adverse effects of the market through economic intervention and redistribution.

In this paper, we revisit Gamble's thesis about the 'steering pessimism' that allowed Thatcher to define the Winter of Discontent as a crisis and to prescribe neoliberalism (with strong government intervention) as the appropriate response. In doing so, we revisit debates on the geographies of state crisis. By our interpretation, Gamble's work provides a useful perspective on the management and mismanagement of territorial inequality. Geographers have long been interested in economic management, social regulation and – of relevance to our argument here – local and regional economic development as the state project manifestation of the relationship between the two. The state is conceived as the site where the technologies and practices that produce, naturalise and manage territorial space are elaborated, exercised and exhausted; in and through which different forces act; and thus as the contingent product of diverse actions and the political struggles of a range of agents. In what follows, we make an argument for greater attention to uneven development as evidence of the contradictions and failures of contemporary state intervention, or rather the paradoxes of neoliberalism in practice, which we show inevitably raise questions about

sub-national policy dynamics. We argue that one possibility for revitalising recent work on Brexit is to place claims about the re-articulation of contradictory ideas about the free economy and the strong state (which Gamble first emphasized in his analysis of the Thatcherite project) alongside long-run analyses of the spatial patterns of state intervention since the 1980s, specifically attempts to displace the tensions surrounding uneven development. In closing, we explain how this (re)new(ed) focus on the geographies of state crisis is both timely and necessary for understanding advanced capitalism.

The state as inescapably geographical

We opened this paper with brief reference to the state as an apparatus of ‘crisis management’, a medium through which political forces act to (temporarily) reconcile the contradictions inherent in the relationship between economic management and social regulation under capitalism. Here we seek to emphasize how the state is also a distinctly geographical and seemingly always spatially shifting project. It is constituted in and through space and remakes its own internal structures and spatial patterns of intervention in response to external circumstances and conditions inside the state-territory. In short, the state operates not only in the process of performing economic development, but also in an effort to control the contradictions emergent from earlier rounds of state intervention and, speaking as geographers, ‘state spatial restructuring’.

Gamble has made an important contribution to the corpus of writing on the conflicts induced through the steady implementation of ideas about monetarism, neoclassical economics, public choice and supply-side economics, which give rise to regulatory deficits, social hostilities and geographical frictions. First, his work has sought to demonstrate how Thatcherism emerged as a response to a particular conception of Britain that percolated through the late 1970s, more so than any structural factors underpinning the series of industrial and public service strikes that occurred in this period. His attention to the ideological aspects of the state piqued the interest of scholars in the popular resonances of the policies and class strategies of Thatcher’s neoliberal project. Complementing the work of Stuart Hall and colleagues on the emergence and endurance of a form of ‘authoritarian populism’,² he spotlighted how popular consent for a limited state role was mobilised through the interpretation of market failure (notably the onset of stagflation) as state failure (the crisis of British Keynesianism) through to governance failure (an indication of – and an accusation against – James Callaghan’s overextended, ‘overloaded’ Labour government). Gamble cogently described how Thatcher – or rather the Thatcherite project, as for Gamble the ‘new right’ necessarily encompassed more than Margaret Thatcher herself – intervened to make a

rational case for the curtailment of an interventionist and universalist welfare state. The social basis for government was mobilised through an alternative narrative in which Thatcher emerged as an authoritarian (favouring an aggressive stance towards the trade unions, but also unwavering in matters of party politics, domestic and international affairs) and capable politician (responding to the concerns of the majority of the electorate).

Second, Gamble's account of Thatcherism – as not so much a response to the contradictions of the post-war settlement, but to the narrative of crisis placed upon those contradictions – was significant with regards to its contribution towards understanding of neoliberal regime shifts. Specifically, it detailed how in responding to the construction of crisis the Thatcherite project more deeply entrenched 'the persistent *failures* of the British state and economy'.³ Accepting this view of Thatcherism as built upon the distortion of the contradictions of the post-war settlement sensitised political-economic analysis to the structural underpinnings of Thatcherism, namely the achievement of a paradoxical combination of regressive, neoliberal policies (intended to achieve an un-steered economy and minimal state) with more pragmatic modernising initiatives (that were reliant upon an interventionist state working to position the national economy favourably within the dynamics of global capitalism through the provision of support for innovation and instilled norms of competition).

Taken together, Gamble's focus on the perceptions and responses of the British governing class worked to connect the ideological with the political and the economic in analyses of Thatcherism. This resonates with some of our own thinking about the role of political discourse and how it becomes entrenched in civil society and in state practices. By and large, we approach capitalism as an inherently crisis-bound system and set out to explain how capitalism prevails in spite of its contradictions and crises tendencies. This includes, but is not limited to, the process through which a particular type of neoliberal 'common sense' has emerged, which has enabled certain specific interests of the ruling sections of society to be 'transformed into the "illusory general interest" of the whole society',⁴ as well as how particular moral, cultural and political ideas that are associated with neoliberalism have become ingrained in forms of social and political organisation. It also involves paying attention as much to how the state suppresses and contains social class conflicts behind a national consensus as the apparatus of the state *itself*.

Empirically, a focus on the form, essence and practices of the state raises questions about the spatial patterns of state intervention (recognising that territory is not a static background, but

relational and thereby crucial to regulatory processes and political relations). Gamble's work elevated critical questions about the geographical context of Thatcherism, which shaped domestic debates on Britain's decline through a primary focus on the national scale. Indicative of this is his discussion of Britain's changing place within the world order and the importance of external relations and events (the Falklands War, the revival of Atlanticism, the turn away from Europe etc.) to the social and ideational basis of the British state. In the introduction to the fourth edition of 'Britain in Decline', he notes that

All discussion of British decline must start from Britain's relationship to the world economy that was the means of Britain's rise, which was transformed in the course of that rise, and to which Britain remains tied. What has to be explained is why the most dynamic and expansionist nation in modern European history, the organiser of the largest world empire, the pioneer of industrialisation, and the country renowned above all others for the continuity of its institutions and the political skill of its ruling class, should have lost out during the last thirty years in competition with Germany, France, and Japan.⁵

Gamble also critiqued the heavy emphasis on British psychology and British culture in alternative discourses of decline, with repeated economic crises positioned as reasons why such assertions appeared "plausible". Similar observations have been made of explanations that attribute responsibility to 'militant unionists' as one element of a broader 'anti-enterprise culture', with work on the interdependent world economy positioned as a means of transcending the nation state as 'the terminal unit and boundary condition for the demarcation of problems and phenomena'.⁶ Yet, we would argue, there is still more to achieve in terms of understanding developments *within* the state, and how sub-national geographical arrangements, in the process of seeking to manage and contain the crisis tendencies and contradictions of capitalism, may lead to the emergence of new problems, as well as conditioning the outcomes for and of different types of state response.

Building on this, sub-national geographies (and the plethora of institutions and practices therein) can be conceptualised as significant units of political and economic analysis within approaches to political economy. There is compelling evidence that uneven development is an increasingly important driver of social and political life and thus – we contend – in order to understand what neoliberalism is, where it comes from, and its travelled trajectory since the Thatcher era, we need to also pay attention to developments at the sub-national scale for understanding Britain in 'decline'. Furthermore, it is with a sub-national lens that the internal contradictions within the nation state can be illuminated, viewed and appreciated: i.e. the widening and deepening of uneven development across Britain, which leads to uneven growth, change and restructuring. Patterns of

state intervention become the source of the next wave of contradictions as the strategies of crisis resolution employed are heterogeneous and mutable – involving variegated responses. They necessarily produce unstable, uneven geographical outcomes to which we must attend if we are to fully understand the complexities of policy and political dynamics, and ultimately avoid crises of state legitimation.

Deploying a situated and context-laden mode of analysis is a usual part of geographical research, because it offers a means of highlighting the contingent mechanisms or processes in and through which state projects are politically made and contested. Contra ‘methodological nationalism’, a focus on the urban and regional level enables us to tease out the social forces and relations that are continuously in articulation thereby illuminating the difference and uneven development that exist on the constitutive ‘inside’ of Thatcherism (or any successor project of neoliberalism), as part and parcel of its (re)production. Within this approach “‘the local’ is not a mere synonym for the particular or the concrete, neither is it a signifier for [clearly] bounded and demarcated spaces’,⁷ rather it is a means of showing how on-the-ground developments become implicated in wider political-economic processes.

The local – in other words – is linked to and constitutive of the institutional sites and governance spaces of the state, as the key producer of programmes of neoliberal transformation that are neither uniform in practice, nor linear in development. It is where the inherent crisis tendencies and contradictions of capital accumulation are switched, displaced, or metamorphosed from the market to the state, patterning governance practices and yielding unequal outcomes, which in turn become the focus of the next round of state intervention. Failures of governance (that may appear as economic crises or social crises rather than failures of market process) originate through the act of engaging, applying, exercising or realizing ideas and – rather than being viewed as evidence of deficiency in method or approach – are framed by the forces acting in and through the state as the basis for ongoing intervention. In this manner, crises change form becoming something *more* than what they were; they can take on new characteristics, often gaining weight, like a snowball rolling down a mountain.⁸

In the final chapter of ‘Britain in Decline’, Gamble called for further attention to the growing divisions between regions and localities, explaining that the success of the Thatcher government had been predicated upon the prioritisation of prosperous areas and employed groups (a ‘spatially selective’⁹ geographical strategy of giving precedence to the South East of England over other

parts of the UK, notably Scotland and the declining industrial areas of the North). He also predicted that future economic prosperity would hinge on overcoming the growing imbalances between rich and poor UK regions. Latterly, geographical scholarship has sought to account for the specific spatiality and materiality of the neoliberal experiment instigated by Thatcher. As Sami Moisiu explains, there has been a notable movement away from economies, success and prosperity characterised by national state territories and in its place the region has emerged as a favoured site for further displaced contradictions, in turn exacerbating spatial uneven development.¹⁰ For geographers, this speaks to both time and space as direct objects of governance and, building on the discussion above, how the basic contradictions and dilemmas of capitalism are temporarily harmonised or reconciled at different scales and sites of action, creating the conditions for the next crisis.

In what follows, we draw together these ideas around the variegated nature of neoliberalism seen as a complex, contingent and tendential *geographical process*, rather than a stable and *stabilizing* configuration, by addressing the social, political and economic tensions, exacerbated by uneven development, that preceded Brexit, and which are being reproduced in new guises in its wake.

Brexit and uneven development

In a bid to contribute to and revitalise geographies of state crisis, in this section we identify interconnections between the British state's inability to control the contradictions of uneven development and how, in seeking to address those contradictions and so make a rational case for itself, the rationalities and logics taken up by the state ultimately start to become irrational. In the final lines of 'Britain in Decline', Gamble observed that the imbalance in Britain's territorial politics would be an ongoing source of instability, and thus the task of finding 'solutions' to regional disparities, and the widening gulf in identities and lifestyles with which the growing divisions between regions in the country were associated, would dominate politics for decades to come.¹¹ This expectation that the political shape of neoliberalism would change is also found in the work of Yahya Madra and Fikret Adaman, who describe how neoliberalism shape shifts in an effort to resolve and absorb conflict.¹² It also parallels our own work on neoliberalism 'not as a set of free market principles so much as an evolving political project that advances as actors and organisations dissipate challenges to its economic, organisational and institutional ideals'.¹³ Elsewhere, we have described how its latest invocation actively cultivates ethno-nationalism and forms of developmentalism that appear initially counter to a neoliberal approach that prescribes interconnected markets and the free movement of goods and people, and pointed towards Brexit

as the moment when consent for neoliberal austerity policies – predicated on claims about the fiscal and social costs of state intervention to limit or compensate for forms of uneven development – became exhausted. Positioning Brexit as a ‘critical moment’, when the antagonisms and contradictions which are always bubbling beneath the surface of society burst out, we signalled the value in pursuing a ‘conjunctural’ analysis that locates the vote to leave the EU in relation to a series of historical trends, tendencies, and intellectual and political movements that stem back to Thatcher.¹⁴

Our work on Brexit connects well with Gamble’s observations about the continuing primacy of politics (rather than free market economics) in processes of neoliberalization. It also aligns with scholarship challenging the reification of the discourse of neoliberalism by asserting that it has no objective reality but must be continually performed by multiple actors and through organisations. What is of interest here is how particular suppositions or readings of the political landscape – such as the trope of ‘left behind’, which in many respects has functioned as a modern diagnosis of Britain’s decline – gain precedence, providing the foundations for future state projects. As we note in our work elsewhere, such a perspective demands some analytical focus on the economy and state relations to complement the principles of conjunctural analysis, notably how the strategic capacity of any given state to perform specific actions is dependent on the (temporary) resolution of capitalism’s crisis-tendencies by those that gain access to, and operate through, the state as an institutional geographical ensemble. Through a continuous process of strategically selective incorporation, certain interest groups throughout economy and society work to secure privileged access to the various institutional divisions of the state and it is through this politically manipulated modality of instituted state power that the strategic direction and policy interventions of any given state may be choreographed to favour those interest groups, classes, places and regions over subaltern people and areas.¹⁵

To put it more concretely, the aftermath of the referendum has seen the forces acting in and through the state working to resolve the ‘Brexit crisis’ through the strategic use of the ‘left behind’ as a policy and political category. In placing emphasis on place, and notably the persistent poverty, economic decay and lack of opportunities that are said to have given rise to discontent within some ‘left-behind’ places and regions, state elites have sought to (re)structure assemblages of power and so enable the continued governance of contemporary capitalism. Instances of failure (for instance, the implementation of neoliberal policies that ignore uneven development, or worse augment it by actively freeing market forces) have – ironically – been used as a basis for EU

withdrawal that looks set to further compound the problems that are said to have driven constituents in the regions hardest hit by the uneven evolution of the UK economy to vote leave.

While it is true that a significant proportion of Leave voters *were* located in poor regions or localities, the common interpretation of Brexit supporters as geographically marginal has been challenged by research which suggests that half of those that voted to leave were comfortably well off. In other words, it was not just voters in red-wall constituencies or dilapidated seaside towns that ascribed to the possibilities of Britain's withdrawal but also 'affluent Eurosceptics' who 'liked where they lived...but were aware of areas close by where they saw problems'.¹⁶ In the most pro-remain places, there were also large numbers of people that voted to leave – more than a million in Scotland and 1.5 million in London – raising questions about the other cultural and contextual aspects of the vote that have not been spotlighted in the same way. Here we argue that rhetoric indicating that it was uneven development rather than socio-economic inequality that patterned the vote has been seized on precisely because it allows the Conservative Party to establish parameters for 'spatial selectivity' in ways that support its own interests: voters can never fully comprehend the current conjuncture and future direction, and so political parties (or similar forces) ascribe meanings to votes *post hoc* in the process of building a hegemonic project that provides the various forces involved with a set of common objectives or goals.¹⁷

Mappings of the referendum result that make clear those in favour of Brexit were not simply – or even – the poorest of Britain's constituents, but those living in declining and lagging areas, have enabled the Conservative Party to suggest that the wave of support for Britain's withdrawal from the EU has strong territorial, rather than social, foundations and what is needed post-Brexit are policies targeted at these co-called "places that don't matter" (as opposed to income redistribution and the reduction of economic inequality). In this way, the EU referendum has served not only as a conduit through which continued EU membership was approved or rejected, but a mechanism through which the Conservative Party appealed to a new and diverse bloc of voters – the so-called red wall – with promises to invest in infrastructure, particularly within the UK's poorest areas, playing well with working class voters in the post-industrial North as well as traditional party supporters in the leafy and prosperous villages of southern England. Keen to preserve the positive social and environmental characteristics of their local area, these long-standing Conservative voters ascribed to 'levelling up' promises to enable business and transport developments in areas of unemployment and destitution because the corollary was that the places in which they lived would

not be targeted. NIMBYism ensured this policy touched down and established a voter alliance across territorial lines.

Indicative of the strategic use of geographies of discontent to link pro-Brexit convictions with Conservative principles is the priority afforded to places over persons in party messaging.¹⁸ Yet the notion of the ‘revenge of the places that don’t matter’, essentially appropriates concrete concerns about prevailing economic and social policies, and the uneven development and inequality to which they give rise, into arguments that lend support to neoliberal interests and establish strategic selectivity in ways that further embed poverty and spatial disadvantage. The locality of Stoke-on-Trent, baptised ‘Capital of Brexit’ in light of its status as the city with the highest Leave majority, exemplifies our arguments. Home of the exported-oriented (predominately to Europe) pottery industry in England and with its local residents known as ‘Potters’, Stoke-on-Trent is a ‘left-behind’ textbook study of where the inability to control uneven development has frequently met with national and local politics in a series of head-on collisions, with the most important being around the Brexit vote of 23 June 2016 – in short, a conjunctural event of multiple crises and contradictions. With 69.4 cent of voters voting to leave, which triggered Paul Nuttall, then leader of the ferociously anti-European UK Independence Party (UKIP) to run for Parliament in Stoke-on-Trent Central in the February 2017, this locality reveals the deep-seated political disaffection with Labour assumptions about working class concerns, as people railed against prolonged economic abandonment and social injustice. It was not about wanting increased state support for those on low incomes – the media discourse about ‘benefit scroungers’ had put paid to that – but a desire for protectionism as a solution to rising inequality. While a close focus on the political drama of the EU referendum might identify this as a transient or short-term crisis – what Gamble would term an *existential* crisis created by the referendum itself (a moment of danger intended by then Prime Minister David Cameron to appease the concerns of European Research Group members within his party that inverted the traditional support of both Labour and the Conservatives) – it was also a symptom of a much deeper, *structural* crisis: a specific expression of the strains or persistent tensions of the neoliberal order, which created the possibility, but not the certainty, of fundamental political and economic change.

Stoke-on-Trent’s economic geography is a classic tale of the rise and fall of resource-based economies and the links between this, multiple rounds of state intervention and governance failures, and parliamentary democracy not being seen to secure the conditions for delivering growth. Stoke identifies how at the very heart of the Brexit conjuncture was a growing disconnect

between citizens and the institutions of government, what amounts to a gradual exhaustion of consent for the neoliberal political economic mainstream, equated with both financial deregulation and the extensive regulation (often at the EU scale) necessary for the ‘free economy’ to function smoothly. It further distinguishes how quick decisions and firm actions to resolve the crisis (including the mobilisation of the ‘left-behind Britain’ narrative by actors and organisations pursuing a regressive, deglobalisation agenda likely to result in lower taxation receipts and less inward investment that will in turn primarily affect such lagging cities and regions) have meant that the crisis has not been significant enough to spur radical change. Instead, it has resulted in a highly discordant state that is struggling to balance the process of extricating the UK from the EU with the management of a society that is now more imbalanced than at any time in living memory.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted these imbalances of combined (that is, growing out of existing configurations) and uneven development, catching the United Kingdom woefully underprepared and exposing vividly its (often devolved) conflicts and contradictions of advanced neoliberalism. The present structural crisis has revealed the distressed state of local economies, particularly in ‘left-behind’ places, and the brittle condition of the local public sector, following decades of underinvestment and disrespect. Although the redistributive switching of the UK state under austerity has, in a deeply contradictory sense, sought to empower the ‘local’ via devolution (City, Town, and Growth Deals) to city-regions and new metropolitan spaces, this has been a very specific form of ‘empowerment’, which is spatially selective and seeks to only give agency to certain strategically significant actors. It has also often focused upon high-end growth, whilst simultaneously ignoring the foundational and civil society aspects of the economy on which it is built. Civil society is increasingly placed on the outside, whereby actors have to repeatably contest (with some albeit limited success) the prevailing direction of locality building. In Stoke-on-Trent, for instance, rising unemployment and low-paid work remain the main causes of increasing poverty and destitution. This is occurring in the shadows of Stoke’s ‘Powering Up’ boosterist and depoliticised narratives, launched in response to the UK Government’s ‘Levelling Up’ political project, purporting through projects such as ‘Silicon Stoke’ to ‘drive economic development by fostering high growth sectors, creating the high skilled well-paid jobs our city needs’¹⁹. Uneven development and its geographical mismanagement continue to take place at pace. By the summer of 2021, there were more than 50,000 persons of working age in-receipt of one or more DWP benefits (plus Housing Benefit) – an increase of 33% in the COVID-19 era, compared with November 2019, in an already highly deprived locality, which has featured in the bottom 10% of most league tables indices on prosperity. This equates to an increase from under a quarter to nearly

one third of the Working Age population, making the task of achieving levelled up social cohesion and solidarity increasingly challenging.²⁰ This situation bolsters concerns with poverty, inequality, economic security and social welfare, and yet to date the response has been geared towards lubricating the market in an effort to reschedule risks and crisis tendencies, rather than invest in the foundational economy. Perhaps – as Gamble observes – the unending nature and *resilience* of the neoliberal order (or rather the difficulty of resolving the contradictions internal to it) encourages a sense of political (and public) fatalism.²¹

Returning to geographies of state crisis

Revisiting ‘Britain in Decline’ at the time of COVID-19, a dual public health and economic emergency, has underscored the centrality of locality and community to everyday lives. Within this paper, we have outlined our own interpretation of Gamble’s work and how it serves as a basis for elaborating a geographical reading of crisis. We have also sought to convince readers of the need to attend to the spatial patterns and accumulations of state intervention since the 1980s in order to understand Brexit as a conjunctural event. Appreciating Brexit in all its complexity, we suggest, might help us progress towards a new economic settlement. If the Winter of Discontent paved the way for the Thatcherite project, then so too might this moment of rupture provide the basis from which to construct a populist political project premised on the rejection of guiding intellectual rationales of the present.

Any great shift in direction, we argue, needs to focus on the state’s inability to contain the crises or contradictions of advanced capitalism in evidence through uneven development. In this paper, we have highlighted the potential for market failure to morph into state failure and governance failure and to be displaced spatially or deferred into a more or less remote future. As we ready ourselves to rebuild and reconstruct within the shattered post-COVID landscape, we must strive to make the economic recovery the starting point for economic reform and a new birth of community. This task starts with illuminating the terrain of the present conjuncture and using this as the basis on which to articulate the need for a welfare-oriented foundational economy that would both strengthen social cohesion and make it possible to tackle other crises, most critically the unfolding climate crisis that is being lived as a new reality.

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