

REBEL REGIONS

IN NOVEMBER 2020, Britain's company register welcomed a curious newcomer onto its rolls: the Northern Independence Party. With the slogan of 'A free Northumbria and fairer North for all', the private company was to run for elections in 2024. Like the Brexit Party, or for that matter the Scottish Nationalists, the outfit's ambitions were openly plebiscitary—a referendum on Northern secession, completing a miniature of Britain's European uncoupling. The NIP is demanding that the UK Parliament hold a referendum on an Independent Northern England, with a 'yes' vote leading to 'the establishment of a sovereign Northern Republic.' The petition ended with a quote from a *Guardian* article by Tom Hazeldine: 'It is a mistake to present the North–South divide as a challenge for a well-intentioned government to overcome, rather than a geographical reflection of how Britain is run, and for whom.'¹

The NIP is no British unicum. One of the most striking by-products of the age of globalization has been a remarkable rise in regionalist sentiment; conflicts between Catalans, Basques and Spaniards, Northerners and *mezzogiornisti*, Flemings and Walloons all puncture the post-national age. Political economy remains a major driver. As Wolfgang Streeck noted in 2017, a 'new nation-state nationalism in Europe shares with regional separatism its opposition to market-opening political centralization: the one fights to prevent, the other to undo it.'² Amid these cases, Britain has undulated with a centre–periphery dynamic unlike any other. The United Kingdom is the most regionally unequal country in the European Union, with a political system more reminiscent of Jacobin centralism than its French neighbour. As Perry Anderson noted in 2014, not France, but 'the regnant bulk of the United Kingdom' is by far the most centralized major society in Europe.³ In the past decade, a series of successive shocks have hit the 'regnant bulk', disturbing

complacency about the British Union and reigniting London's fears of Scottish separation. The region known as 'the North' played an instrumental role in these upsets. In 2016, it returned majorities for the Leave vote in the Brexit referendum; in 2019, its voters defected from Labour and returned Boris Johnson to Downing Street.

Tom Hazeldine's *The Northern Question* imposes a much-needed historical lens on the discussion.⁴ Rather than trade in essentialism about a North hesitant to change, Hazeldine deploys a Marxist method to explain the region's woes. His first point of reference is Antonio Gramsci, whose reflections on the 'Southern Question' inflect the opening pages of his book. The Italian Marxist saw his party as the challenger to a timid Northern bourgeoisie that had failed to rally the peninsula around a popular-democratic Jacobin programme; instead, it brokered deals with Southern landowners and ecclesiastical classes, burdening the unified Italian nation-state with its typically hybrid character. Only a party with Machiavellian ambitions for national renewal could complete the task shirked by Italy's Northern leaders, unwilling and unable to bury the old order. Hazeldine proposes a measured projection of this Gramscian frame onto Britain. *The Northern Question* takes as its epigraph the words of Gramsci's prodigious Scottish pupil, Tom Nairn:

The lamented 'growing abyss' between North and South should not really be a subject for mere figures, nor for moral outrage, nor for futile retreats of Westminster-inspired 'modernization': it can't be tackled within the existing State, because it is the existing State, the dominance of the Crown (or 'anti-industrial') culture, the thriving pseudo-nationalism of the Old Regime.⁵

Any analysis of the North must of course begin with the question of whether 'it' actually exists. Hazeldine is clear that there is more to the region than cultural affect, an aggregate of accents and music scenes. Geographic definitions have varied: north of the River Trent, the Mersey,

¹ Tom Hazeldine, 'London Punishing the North Is No Accident: It's How England Is Run', *Guardian*, 19 October 2020.

² Wolfgang Streeck, 'Reflections on Political Scale', *Jurisprudence*, vol. 10, no. 1, February 2019.

³ Perry Anderson, 'Forget about Paris', *LRB*, 23 January 2014.

⁴ Tom Hazeldine, *The Northern Question: A History of a Divided Country*, London and New York 2020; henceforward, TNQ.

⁵ Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and Its Monarchy*, London and New York 2011 [1988], p. 244.

the Ribble—or the Severn–Wash divide, which would include the economically blighted Midlands? Hazeldine’s answer is structural. He wants to explore the relation of the rise and fall of the North, as an industrial powerhouse, to the rise and rise of London, as a capital of empire and high finance. As he notes, deindustrialization has meant that contemporary regional disparities in England have been blurred; they are now characterized less by a national division of labour than by ‘the positional superiority of London in a services-dominated national economic space’. In this context, the northern rustbelt acts as the ‘senior representative’ of a much larger left-behind England.⁶ Yet the North has never achieved the ‘escape velocity’ needed to free itself from its industrial past: where the mills and coal-pits started, the North begins.

So defined, Hazeldine’s North centres on the old Lancashire–Yorkshire textile belt, the coalfields and the former heavy-industrial districts, from North Derbyshire up to Newcastle and Carlisle. The Midlands, he says, has its own tale to tell. Unsurprisingly, evidence to date the first birth pangs of Northern regional consciousness is found in the mid-19th-century ‘industrial novel’: Disraeli’s *Sybil* (1845), Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854), Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849). A sense of cultural belonging certainly exists here still, Hazeldine thinks, although it is ‘low-wattage’ compared to the Basque Country and Catalonia, with their distinctive languages and aspirations for self-rule. Regional identities in England have been ‘levelled out’ by a millennium of centralized rule and powerful national media.⁷

Industry’s challenge

Hazeldine travels far back to establish the *differentia specifica* of the North. Roman settlements were concentrated in the more hospitable South, with Chester and York as distant outposts amid the upland moors and mountains; beyond them lay only ‘the garrison economy of the border country’. Northern resistance to the Norman Conquest was crushed with scorched-earth tactics, and vast holdings were parcelled out to the new lords. Seigneurial supervision was always more thinly stretched here, compared to the South; but literacy was lower, too. The North’s liegemen never enjoyed the same degree of legal centralization that enabled enclosure and agrarian improvement in Southern England, where an enterprising gentry helped to kickstart the agricultural revolution and

⁶ TNQ, p. 12.

⁷ TNQ, pp. 4, 14.

grow London into one of the largest early-modern cities. By the mid-16th century, England north of the Trent accounted for only 8 per cent of taxable wealth. In the struggles of the early-modern era, the North was a stronghold for the conservative cause: traditional religion, baronial privilege, Crown against Parliament.

It was the Industrial Revolution that transformed the region from ‘an obscure, ill-cultivated swamp’ (Engels) into the hub of an industrial-capitalist system that would be emulated the world over.⁸ A handicraft textile industry on the putting-out system depended upon a mass of Pennine cottagers, whose subdivided plots left them unable to live off the land. The water-powered spinning mill trialled by Arkwright in 1771 was swiftly followed by Watt’s steam-powered technology: by 1800, there were over fifty steam engines in Manchester and Leeds. Child labour in the mills was supplemented by immigration from British-ruled Ireland. Hazeldine makes clear, however, that the North’s industrial take-off was spring-boarded by London’s geopolitical ambitions: the Navigation Acts of the Cromwellian period set the stage for aggressive naval expansion in the Caribbean and beyond, while the City ‘funnelled the world’s goods and funds through its wharves and counting houses’. Liverpool accounted for the bulk of British slave ships in the late 18th century, exchanging their human cargo for bales of plantation cotton. He is unequivocal, too, about the scale of state repression used to crush working-class discontent. In 1811, Lord Liverpool’s government is said to have fielded 12,000 troops to put down Luddite riots. Eight years later, weavers, spinners, hatters and shoemakers made up the greater part of the dead and wounded at Peterloo. With the Reform Bill of 1832, the Whigs ‘cauterized the general unrest by admitting the middle classes into the Constitution.’⁹

Hazeldine argues that the North has been the launch pad for three successive attempts to challenge the hegemony of the Southern-based regime of landed-finance capital. The first was Chartism. Though the Charter’s Six Points—among them universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, equal constituencies—were drafted by London cabinet-maker William Lovett, and the national petition was launched from Birmingham, Hazeldine convincingly argues that the movement’s strength lay with the Northern industrial operatives and outworkers who streamed up onto the moors for the great gatherings of the National Charter Association,

⁸ TNQ, p. 45.

⁹ TNQ, pp. 47–9, 53–5, 61.

launched in Manchester at a meeting chaired by power-loom weaver James Leach. Chartism was given voice and direction by the Leeds-based *Northern Star*—and viciously attacked by the Manchester *Guardian*. In 1842, amid growing economic distress, the ‘Manchester insurrection’ (Carlyle) called for a general strike until the Charter had been made the law of the land. Peel’s government once more sent troops to the mill towns. Some Chartists were shot, hundreds more sentenced to transportation. Hunger and repression did their work. The giant London rally of 1848 proved to be Chartism’s swan-song.¹⁰

After the defeat of the Charter, the North’s working-class politics were channelled in an increasingly reformist direction—the co-operative movement and the town hall. Chartism’s death has been described as marking ‘the moment of the retreat of the (English) proletariat, henceforth tied body and soul to the triumphal chariot of the bourgeoisie.’¹¹ During the US Civil War, it is true, Northern workers refused to work with cotton picked by Confederate slaves, adding an urban picket line to the Union’s Atlantic blockade. (The *Manchester Guardian* instructed workers to drop the embargo, while the Mersey was said to be adorned with more Confederate flags than Virginia herself.) In 1868, however, the expansion of the suffrage to rate-paying men saw the North’s working-class voters support a string of Tory and Liberal MPs; Disraeli’s campaign against ‘Popery’ made strong headway. ‘Once again the proletariat has disgraced itself terribly’, Engels wrote to Marx. ‘Bolton, Preston, Blackburn, etc., practically nothing but Tories. Everywhere the proletariat is the tag, rag and bobtail of the official parties.’¹² The English industrial working class was the first of its kind; like its capitalism, it had all the curses of the nation’s early development.

The North’s second challenge for hegemony, in Hazeldine’s reading, was the Manchester liberalism of Cobden and Bright. The Anti-Corn Law League, launched in 1839, was based squarely on ‘the cotton interest’. The campaign was conducted by Cobden as an insurgent political campaign, pitting free enterprise against ‘the political monopoly of the great landowners’, with pamphlets, petitions and public rallies. But as

¹⁰ TNQ, pp. 62–6.

¹¹ Theodore Rothstein, *From Chartism to Labourism: Historical Sketches of the English Working Class*, London 1929. Rothstein (1871–1953) was a Lithuanian-born, London-based Marxist journalist, a founder of the CPGB in 1920, later Soviet ambassador to Iran.

¹² TNQ, p. 80.

The Northern Question notes, repeal of the Corn Laws was also beneficial to City merchants and financiers, since it meant a rise in international trade, while the incomes of large landholders were increasingly drawn from urban ground rents and financial investments. But though the North's economic demand was won—Peel duly repealed the laws in 1846—its political impact was minimal. Cobden famously complained that his fellow factory owners gloried in being ‘the toadies of a clodpole aristocracy’—content to remain, as *The Northern Question* puts it, a ‘civic adjunct’ to the governing class. There was indeed a genuine confluence of interests between the two class blocs, given the industrialists’ dependence on colonial markets and shared hostility to organized labour. The upshot? ‘The pre-industrial mould of British politics remained unbroken, with fateful consequences for the North once its commercial fortunes began to slide.’¹³

That descent was already beginning in the 1880s. The second phase of the industrial revolution, based on the expansion of capital-goods production, saw heavy-industrial complexes of iron and steel, ship building and engineering formed around the Northern coal ports, complemented by a heavy-chemicals industry for soda, soap and glass. Industrial machinery was exported to fast-growing factory districts in Germany, Russia, Japan. Although the North remained a strategic centre, firms increasingly shifted their head offices to London. English manufacturing was losing its international comparative advantage: Detroit and the Ruhr had caught up on machinery and labour productivity. The City, disconnected from domestic industry, poured investment overseas into railways and foreign-government bonds. While Britain's rivals industrialized, little capital went to update the North's manufacturing technology. Automobiles, white goods and electronics would be concentrated in the Midlands and Southeast. *The Northern Question* sums up: ‘For the North, it was a case of so far and no further: from now on it would have to sink or swim with its 19th-century coal mines, textile mills, steelworks and shipyards’—sectors that, by the 1920s, employed up to half of all insured workers in the region.¹⁴

Though the North supplied the industrial reserve that kept Britain in the field for the duration of the Great War, the 1920s sealed its fate. Montagu Norman at the Bank of England undertook a ruthless attempt to reboot the *belle époque*, sacrificing Northern industry on the altar of sound

¹³ TNQ, pp. 69–70.

¹⁴ TNQ, pp. 71–3.

money. Even Bolton's Tory MP began railing against the gold standard as 'a fetish'—'it does not create a yard of cloth; it does not work a single loom or a single spindle.' Control over credit instruments proved more important for the City. In the 1930s, the great deflation saw unemployment of over 20 per cent in the North. Gaunt-faced hunger marchers set out from Jarrow, where the steel and ship-building industries had collapsed. Meanwhile the suburban Southeast enjoyed an inter-war house-building boom, buoyed up by the expansion of light industry.¹⁵

The labourist arc

This brings us to *The Northern Question's* third hegemonic challenger: the Labour Party. Although, in Nairn's classic anatomization,¹⁶ the Party's Fabian 'head' was firmly located in London, its heart—the local membership, initially grouped in the ILP—and dues-paying brawn, the trade-union movement, were heavily Northern-based, with outposts in Scotland and South Wales; after the 1906 election, 40 per cent of Labour's parliamentary cohort was from Lancashire. Things did not start well. In the 1920s, as Hazeldine puts it, the two wings of the labour movement, parliamentary and trade-union, 'took it in turns to court disaster through the timidity of their leaders.' In the short-lived 1924 Labour government, Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Snowden declared his task to be resisting all his colleagues' demands for expenditure. In 1926, when colliery owners enforced wage cuts through lock-outs, the TUC responded with a half-hearted call for a general strike. The 1929 Labour government ruled out a public-works programme as unemployment soared. Its leaders, Snowden and Ramsay MacDonald, deserted to join the Tories in a National Government in order to cut unemployment benefit by 10 per cent—'balancing the books on the backs of the unemployed', as *The Northern Question* puts it.¹⁷

Labour's landslide victory in 1945 barely tipped the scales for the region, as Hazeldine shows. Focused on Cold War nuclear build-up and national welfarism, Attlee allowed British capital to leak abroad and failed to channel it northwards. The 'Natopolitan' ideology, as Edward Thompson termed it, had a tight grip on Labour from the first. In this constellation, Hazeldine notes, the Northern Question was reduced to 'regional

¹⁵ TNQ, pp. 91, 2, 100, 106.

¹⁶ Tom Nairn, 'The Nature of the Labour Party', NLR 1/27, Sept–Oct 1964 and NLR 1/128, Nov–Dec 1964.

¹⁷ TNQ, pp. 93, 96–7, 103.

policy', involving 'a modest stimulus to private-sector investment and job-creation'. The overwhelming imperative for the Attlee government was to keep sterling strong. Labour offered no planned alternative to the North's developmental cul-de-sac. Instead, the 1944 Education Act offered individual escape routes. The post-war expansion of higher education helped to underpin the extraordinary Northern cultural florescence of the early 1960s—fiction, film, theatre, journalism and a Mersey-based music scene. But almost without exception these young writers and musicians were snapped up, published, performed and produced in Swinging London—'Penny Lane remembered from the greater comfort of Abbey Road.'¹⁸ The ex-Manchester *Guardian's* relocation to Gray's Inn Road in 1964 was indicative.

Only in the mid-1960s did a *dirigiste* Labour impulse briefly aim at regional reversal. For the 1964 election, Wilson toured the North claiming that 'economic mismanagement' had held back expansion by 'burdening the South with congestion while starving the North of investment.' A Department of Economic Affairs would devise a future growth path, with a National Plan to 'check the present drift to the South and to build up the declining economies in other parts of our country'—a telling ellipsis. However, pressure from Washington and Threadneedle Street quickly put an end to Labour's developmentalist experiment. Inflicting a shock deflation, Wilson reverted back to private-sector subsidies and modest municipal grants. 'Once again', in Hazeldine's words, 'the domestic economy would have to take the strain of problems on the external account.'¹⁹ The transitional 1970s did allow for some Northern holdouts: experiments in local self-management tried to convert private-sector conglomerates into workers' co-operatives; the Bennite 'Alternative Economic Strategy' promised economic nationalism without managerial chicanery. In 1974, Yorkshire miners saw off the Heath government's attempt to cut them down to size. Regional-expenditure rates reached new highs.

Within a decade, Thatcher had inflicted the region's industrial *coup de grâce*. While the City was geared up for Big Bang deregulation, pit closures paved the way for the miners' 1985 defeat. Northern industry 'gave up the ghost', while England began to Londonize at an accelerating rate and house prices began their dizzying rise. In 1980s popular culture,

¹⁸ TNQ, pp. 116, 124.

¹⁹ TNQ, pp. 132–3.

the ‘loadsamoney’ South was pitted against the North’s ‘gizzajob’.²⁰ Elected to salve Britain’s regional divisions, New Labour oversaw the further deregulation of the City and condemned the manufacturing sector to perpetual slump. Encomia to a ‘vibrant’, Beatles-esque Manchester could hardly camouflage the stubborn fact of decline. The best Brown could offer was tax credits and promises to lure private developers to Northern cities. The New Labour attitude to Northern voters was exemplified by Peter Mandelson’s ‘they have nowhere else to go.’

Signs of defection from Labour were already visible by the early 2000s. Local officials signalled plummeting party membership in Northern wards and increasing anger at the Party’s flagrantly metropolitan identity. In place of redistribution, Blair could point to the regional grants included in the EU’s Lisbon package; but these merely pumped up the ‘heritage industry’ and a service-sector model that cast the island as the EU’s low-wage employer of last resort. The bursting Blair–Brown financial bubble, followed by City bailouts amid severe austerity for the North, intensified the discontent. The Brexit issue, Hazeldine writes, handed a political weapon to a class and a region that had been denied one by Labourist hegemony for too long. In the June 2016 referendum, the North duly used it to deliver a stinging rebuke—to Westminster, as much as Brussels. Labour under Corbyn committed ‘electoral suicide’ in pressing for a second referendum, abandoning its former heartlands to Johnson’s Conservatives, with their pledge to ‘get Brexit done’.²¹ In December 2019, Labour voters broke ranks for a second time and dynamited the Northern ‘red wall’. The Corbynite surge had not managed to escape the country’s deep metropolitan bias: north of the Trent, even though young voters in the big university cities mobilized for Corbyn, the old mill towns and former coal districts swung Tory. Buses filled with London Labour members, commuting to Yorkshire and Lancashire to canvas for the 2019 election, could not reverse that fate. As Owen Hatherley put it, the two electorates, North and South, inhabited divergent life worlds of neoliberal inequality.²²

‘The North will rise again’, The Fall’s Mark E. Smith had prophesied in 1980. In retrospect the song reads like an eerie premonition of the

²⁰ Respectively, Harry Enfield’s single ‘Loadsamoney (Doing Up the House)’ and Alan Bleasdale’s serial TV drama, *Boys from the Blackstuff*.

²¹ TNQ, p. 220.

²² Owen Hatherley, ‘The Government of London’, *NLR* 122, Mar–Apr 2020, p. 112.

shockwaves Northern voters would send through the Westminster bubble in the late 2010s.²³ To what effect? In giving Johnson's government another five years, Northern voters might seem to have abandoned the project of counter-hegemony and instead thrown in their lot with the Southern aristo-bourgeois regime. As Hazeldine admits, a favourable outcome for the North has against it 'the entire weight of English history and nearly every vested interest in the country.' Yet the region remains permanently consequential for the country as a whole. Today, the North accounts for a quarter of the UK's population and parliamentary seats, but only a fifth of its GDP. The continuing power of the City-Whitehall nexus illustrates that the allocation of economic activity across a small island is ultimately a political question, Hazeldine writes. Discontent in Scotland and Northern Ireland may present more actual threats to the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom today, but—here *The Northern Question* channels Nairn again—beneath the 'surface crises' of economic stagnation and peripheral nationalism lies 'a generalized disequilibrium of class, nation and region'. The problem of the North isn't going away any time soon.²⁴

In the Belgian mirror

The Northern Question combines deep knowledge of British economic history and Westminster power politics with a warm but sober understanding of the North's regional sensibilities. Although *about* a region, Hazeldine's book is hardly regionalist, let alone separatist. Instead of peeking over the Trent at the Westminster citadel, *The Northern Question* deploys the Northern frame for a telescopic reading of British capitalism itself—'a geographical reflection of how Britain is run, and for whom.' In this sense, the panorama of uneven and combined development seen from England's North not only tells us something about the UK, but about the advanced-capitalist world as a whole. 'Capitalism is uneven

²³ As Mark Fisher noted, the protagonist of Smith's song aimed at restoring the North to an unspecified glory: 'perhaps to its Victorian moment of economic and industrial supremacy; perhaps to some more ancient pre-eminence, perhaps to a greatness that will eclipse anything that has come before. More than a mere regional railing against the capital, in Smith's vision the North comes to stand for everything suppressed by urbane good taste: the esoteric, the anomalous, the vulgar sublime, that is to say, the Weird and the Grotesque itself.' Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, London 2016, pp. 36–7.

²⁴ TNQ, pp. 220–2.

geographical development’, David Harvey has noted.²⁵ But what counterfactuals does this allow? And what does Hazeldine’s North look like in a comparative perspective?

Across the Channel, Belgium was the second country after Britain to undergo a precocious industrial revolution. The process was partly driven by capital transfers from the English North: the Lancashire blacksmith and toolmaker William Cockerill arrived in Liège in 1799, when the Southern Low Countries—formerly a Habsburg possession—had been annexed to the French Republic under Napoleon’s forces. Cockerill found the social pre-conditions for mechanizing the Verviers woollen-handicraft industry not so different from those at home. His son John Cockerill expanded the family’s machine-building firm into a massive ironworks in the Seraing basin, turning the small post-Napoleonic buffer state into a global leader in steel production.

As de Gaulle later quipped, the Kingdom of Belgium was always a country ‘created by the British to annoy the French’. In 1815 the (largely Catholic) Southern Low Countries had been gifted to the (Protestant) Dutch monarch by the Congress of Vienna, but Brabant radicals rose against Dutch rule in 1830, with the tacit backing of the clergy and landowning nobility. In the heat of the 1830 revolt, Palmerston’s Cabinet engineered the new state as a perfect replica of the Westminster model, installing as its first king the uncle of the future Queen Victoria. The Belgian ruling bloc equally united a wealthy aristocratic landowning class with rising industrial strata, tightly knit around an *arriviste* royal house, and soon strutting an empire in the Congo built on raw-resource extraction. The family resemblance was remarkable—although Belgian elites, inured against external absolutist rule, always tolerated a higher degree of provincial and municipal autonomy. As Marx remarked, Belgium was ‘the snug, well-hedged, little paradise of the landlord, the capitalist and the priest’.

The development of 19th-century Belgian capitalism also offered, in microcosm, a parallel to the deep regional divisions of its larger overseas neighbour. Western Europe’s bourgeois enclave was linguistically divided between a poor agrarian Dutch-speaking north—the province

²⁵ David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, London and New York 2006, p. 115; cited TNQ, p. 1.

of Flanders, with its North Sea estuary port at Antwerp—and the industrializing, mainly Francophone, southern province of Wallonia, oriented south and east towards France and Germany. Like the English North, the Belgian South developed into a smokestack landscape of steel mills, textile factories and mines, the ‘industrial furrow’ of the Sambre–Meuse valley, running from the Borinage coalfields to Charleroi, Liège and Verviers. Meanwhile the large agricultural hinterland of Flanders, populated by peasant families and putting-out households, was the equivalent of Britain’s internal Irish colony. In the 1840s, overtaken by a potato famine of Irish proportions, and as domestic weaving collapsed in face of international competition, the Flemish countryside discharged hundreds of thousands of impoverished cottagers into Wallonian mines and mills. There, their immigrant children quickly grew Francophone, shedding Dutch-speaking roots. As late as 1904, Rosa Luxemburg could speak of Flemish workers as ‘also dispossessed of their language’.

Wallonia’s industrial capital was never locally sourced. Instead, it was sponsored by financiers and landowners from splendid villas in Francophone Brussels, operating through holding companies structured by giant investment banks. An administrative centre under the Habsburgs, well-staffed with lawyers and bankers, Brussels was, like London, an essentially cosmopolitan city, its gaze always directed outward, and embedded in international capital flows that made it more beholden to foreign debtors than to workers in its own hinterland. These qualities also made French-speaking Brussels an essential *Fremdkörper*, situated within a Dutch-speaking North, overseeing a rapidly industrializing South, each either territorially or linguistically distinct from the Belgian capital. Capitalist development only deepened this outsider status. Far more than London, Brussels would be characterized by the absence of manufacturing, and consequently of an urban proletariat. Instead, as noted by the Flemish-nationalist historian Antoon Roosens, a high concentration of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois consumers made the capital ‘by far the most important market in the country for all finished industrial products.’ This ‘abnormal social composition’ also explained the city’s persistent provincialism, populated by citizens who had ‘made bourgeois mimesis their very mode of thinking and living.’²⁶

²⁶ See Antoon Roosens, *De Vlaamse kwestie: ‘pamflet’ over een onbegrepen probleem*, Leuven 1981; still the best domestic treatment of the Flemish question from a Marxist viewpoint. For an account of Roosens’s life, see Jelle Versieren, *De politieke biografie van Antoon Roosens, 1929–2003: tussen natie en klasse*, unpublished doctoral dissertation at the University of Ghent, 2008.

More an administrative centre than a megacity, Brussels lacked the ‘red belts’ which gave suburban Paris and London their municipal radicals (even if Marx penned the *Communist Manifesto* here in 1847).

As with Britain, the head-start provided by Belgium’s early industrialization had turned into a disadvantage by the 1900s. Like England’s North, Wallonia was overtaken by the rise of more dynamic manufacturing centres in the Ruhr and beyond. After 1914, Belgian decline accelerated precipitously: World War One brought devastation, deepened by the Depression and Nazi occupation. In the post-war era, Belgium’s position was weaker still than Britain’s, with a much smaller and more exposed domestic market. At this point, however, the trajectories of the two economies diverged—with important consequences for their regional outcomes. A number of factors were involved. First, while post-war British leaders struggled to maintain the UK’s world-imperial privilege, Belgium’s political elites were ready for a new start. Threatened by international competition, they recognized a small economy at the centre of Europe could only survive as an open transit point for neighbouring economies. Churchill and Eden were happy to watch European integration from afar, priding themselves on the special relationship with Washington. With this imperial hangover, Britain never produced an equivalent to Paul-Henri Spaak, who played a central role in drafting the Treaty of Rome and succeeded in getting both the EEC and NATO headquartered in Brussels. Unlike de Gaulle, Spaak took care to hitch his country’s wagon to European integration without angering the American allies, making clear that Belgium would never plan to build a rival pole to Washington; quite the contrary.²⁷ Europeanization and internal modernization then went hand in hand.

Unexpectedly, the Flemish region reaped the primary fruits of this modernizing strategy. A Ten-Year Plan re-tooled the port of Antwerp to meet the needs of American multinationals. It soon transcended mere transit status, providing a penumbra of assembly plants and light-industrial complexes around the docks to finish and repackage US goods for inland destinations. At the same time, relying on its maritime pivot, Flemish

²⁷ Spaak, later NATO Secretary General, was rumoured to have been on the US payroll while in exile during the War, leading Marcel Liebman—with Ernest Mandel, one of Belgium’s foremost Marxist thinkers—to dub him ‘one of the most nefarious characters in contemporary Belgian history’. See Marcel Liebman, ‘Paul-Henri Spaak (1899–1972), ou la politique du cynisme. Éléments pour une étude biographique’, in *Entre histoire et politique: dix portraits*, Brussels 2006, pp. 151–77.

policy makers were able to turn the region into an export power for an eager German neighbour. Unlike its Irish counterpart, Flanders did not rest content as a simple safe haven for offshore capital. Instead, the Flemish elite began an ambitious drive towards a West-European knowledge economy, preparing an under-educated workforce for the era of high-value-added production. Petrochemical industries were propped up by a state-led university system, joined by world-class research clusters in bioengineering and medical sciences.

By the 1960s, the Anglo-Belgian divergence was becoming plain to see. Between 1950 and 1985, Belgium's growth rates were 50 per cent higher than the UK's, driven mainly by modern light-industrial development around Antwerp, assisted by the regulatory machine in Brussels. When UK growth rates did recover, from 1985 to 2008, the expansion was concentrated in the Southeast, driven by crisis-prone financial expansion and asset-price inflation. Here lay another contrast: the role played by London in England's North–South divide had no parallel in Belgium. First, Brussels has never been an organic part of either region; it is seen from Wallonia as a citadel of industrial exploiters, while for Flanders it is a mere 'oil stain' of *francophonie*. In this sense, Belgium could never be Brussellized, in the way that the UK had Londonized. On the contrary, Brussels had to watch the growth of its rival, Antwerp, as a multinational business centre, while it became mainly a supplier of regulatory services, helping American companies navigate the EEC. Second, while the City of London expanded relentlessly on the basis of Eurodollar trading, the post-war retreat of Belgium's old holding bourgeoisie demoted Brussels as a financial hub. Unlike the UK, Belgium was able to shuffle a redundant rentier class off-stage and kickstart a new developmental trajectory.

Regional partitions

And Wallonia? In 1960–61, galvanized by a massive strike wave, support grew for a regionalist breakaway movement as proposed by the charismatic metalworkers' leader André Renard. Flemish support for the return of the Nazi-collaborationist King Leopold III in 1950, bitterly opposed in Wallonia, helped to cast the Flemish North as a drag on the South's socialist ambitions. Rather than accept Flemish cohabitation in a house tended by Belgium's bourgeoisie, Wallonia's proletariat should contemplate a proper jailbreak. The escape was to be both economic and

political: autonomy for the country's two linguistic communities, and a socialization of industry in the South. Although never a majority force in the Parti Socialiste (ps), Renardists assembled a lively cohort for socialism in one region.

Before too long, however—compounding the shock loss of the Congo in 1960—Europe's oldest steel sector was hit by the consequences of global overcapacity. Suddenly, there was no industry left to nationalize. By the early 1970s, Renard's followers were left with a desiccated industrial landscape, only meagrely irrigated by state coffers. Meanwhile, in 1968 Flemish students had followed their Parisian counterparts by demanding an end to the Francophone dominance at the country's oldest academic institution, the Catholic University of Leuven. Regionalization was now continuing at cruising speed, but hardly to the South's benefit. Instead, Liège and Charleroi became the ruined temples of Belgian manufacturing, Manchesters without the sea, Pittsburghs on the Meuse.

These developments gave the final push to a tottering *Belgique à papa*.²⁸ From 1970 onwards, Belgium's old guard relaxed its grip on the unitary state as it initiated a series of reforms to regionalize and de-centralize the political system. Three official language communities, Dutch (59.6 per cent), French (40 per cent) and German (0.4 per cent), were established through the *talentelling* (language count); they would eventually acquire a council each, charged with education. Three political regions—the Brussels Capital Region, Flanders and Wallonia—were also given their own parliaments. An intricate system of financial transfers was set in place—disparagingly known as *centenfederalisme*, or 'cash federalism', by Flemish nationalists—through which regions and communities would receive the bulk of their budgets from the central government. Step by step, in the 1980s, 90s and 2000s, new institutions began to operate and the Constitution was amended to define Belgium as 'a federal state composed of communities and regions'.

Wallonia's leaders decided to swim with the tide. During the crisis years of the 1970s, they picked at the carcass of the unitary state and secured emergency funding for Wallonia. It was clear that the centre of gravity of the Belgian economy had shifted dramatically northward: two economic poles—the port delta around Antwerp and a Brussellian metropole

²⁸ André Mommen, *De teloorgang van de Belgische bourgeoisie*, Leuven 1982, for the best long-term history of Belgian ruling-class formation.

welcoming lobbyists into a growing EU bureaucracy—had replaced the South’s industrial magnets. The shift left behind a self-determining Wallonia that now had little to determine for itself. Subsequent generations of Walloon Socialists vacillated between performative unionism in government, to assure revenue for their region, and an assertive regionalism when stuck in opposition.²⁹ The Flemish bias towards export strategies, coupled with the North’s voting power, further marginalized the Renardist tendency. In the 1980s, the Walloon Socialist leader André Cools tried to counter regional decline by promoting municipal sharing schemes known as *intercommunales*: local councils could jointly manage public services and safeguard the country’s welfare gains.³⁰

Here was a further difference between Wallonia’s post-industrial status and that of England’s North. Compared to Thatcher’s onslaught, the neoliberal medicine administered by her Belgian admirer Wilfried Martens was relatively mild. The Catholic Party leader was partly checked by the stiff opposition of the Christian-Democrat trade-union wing. Federalism certainly helped to cushion the blow, albeit more through a Hegelian cunning of *unreason*: Belgium’s byzantine set-up has given Francophone Socialists veto power over a neoliberal push from the export-oriented North, despite the latter’s greater voting strength. With conservatives permanently unable to gain a unicameral majority *à la* Thatcher, it has been much easier to maintain Belgium’s corporatist structures—union control of social-security finances, enforced social bargaining, wage indexation, generous insurance mechanisms. In a small country with a relatively well-organized working class—in 2019, union membership surpassed 50 per cent—Thatcher’s *Blitzkrieg* on the miners never was a practical possibility. Unlike Italy or France, Belgian elites were also less eager to instrumentalize the EU to implement capitalist policy by stealth. That option required a greater degree of elite closure anyway, something Belgium’s fractious ruling bloc could never muster.

Flanders became the luckiest legatee of Belgium’s regional partition. Fusing the institutions of the Flemish ‘community’ with those of the

²⁹ A formulation of the journalist Rik Van Cauwelaert.

³⁰ Cools was assassinated in 1991, four months before the so-called ‘Black Sunday’ election in which the Flemish far right first broke through the electoral ceiling. Two cronies of the Sicilian mafia were later apprehended as Cools’s killers. In 2017 the so-called ‘Publifin’ affair exposed widespread corruption in the Wallonian ps, which allegedly milked the country’s *intercommunales* as clientelist cash cows.

Flanders ‘region’, it achieved full parliamentary devolution in 1995. For the Flemings, the Belgian house has been *uitgeleefd*—out-lived, or perhaps out-grown. As with any separatist squabble, the ‘transfer debate’ remains rife with acrimony; in 2005, Flemish nationalists drove a lorry full of fake euro bills to the south of their language border. The man who performed this stunt, Bart De Wever, is now Mayor of Antwerp. He has become only slightly less histrionic in his advocacy for the city’s export interests. No regionally unified Flemish capitalist class has cohered around this transition—yet.³¹ Both the port of Antwerp and the Brussels metropolitan region are domains where foreign companies call the shots, ‘facilitated’ by Flemish and local authorities. Attempts to grant a Flemish-separatist project real political-economic depth remain breathless at best, mostly ruses to normalize the region’s far right. Nevertheless, visions of a regionally anchored neoliberalism have enjoyed a resurgence since 2010 with the rise of the free-market N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, or New Flemish Alliance), currently the dominant party in Flanders—and led by the same Bart De Wever. Opting for a gradualist line—first confederalism, then full independence—the N-VA is without doubt the most vocal of all separatist formations. The other contender, Vlaams Belang, has always stuck to a more chauvinist line, preferring to save money by keeping the foreigners out.

Lessons for the North?

English Northerners undoubtedly have reasons to be envious of their Walloon cousins. Though companions of the same post-industrial fate, Belgian deindustrialization has treated its working classes more fairly and less punitively. Walloon clientelism has proved less financialized, with social housing keeping up a steady pace of growth, in contrast to the council-housing sell-offs granted by Thatcher to the North’s ex-factory workers—said by some to be a key indicator of the Brexit vote. Contemporary Belgium is certainly no corporatist Eden, untouched by the market turn. But it has resisted many of the trends that have scarred

³¹ See Matthias Lievens, ‘De Vlaamse bourgeoisie: 1 & 2’, *Lava*, Oct–Dec 2020, and Vincent Scheltiens, *Met dank aan de overkant: een politieke geschiedenis van België*, Antwerp 2017, for two outstanding recent treatments of this question. After Paul Dirckx’s *La concurrence ethnique: La Belgique, l’Europe et le néolibéralisme* (2012), Scheltiens’ book—its title translates as ‘With Thanks to the Other Side’—offers the closest equivalent of Hazeldine’s for Belgium, showing how historical squabbles between Walloons and Flemings mainly serve as a channel for national class tensions.

countries in the developed world and boasts a better Gini-coefficient than other early industrializers.

Anglo-Belgian divergences should not be overstated, however. Regionalization has hardly been a benediction to Belgium's South. While Britain has six of the ten poorest regions in Northwest Europe, the Walloon regions of Hainaut, Liège and Charleroi are little better off. And just as South Yorkshire is only a few hours from inner London—still Europe's richest district—so Liège also lies conspicuously closely to Luxembourg. Federalization has helped Wallonia, but it has hardly saved it. The cinema of the Dardenne brothers, with its focus on 'poverty' rather than class, provides aesthetic backing for a PS project of federally funded regional poverty management for the South that has given up hopes of reindustrialization altogether. The Dardennes' oeuvre, from *Rosetta* to *Two Days, One Night* and *The Unknown Girl*, makes a striking contrast to the class confrontations depicted in the electrifying 1934 documentary *Misère au Borinage* by Henri Storck and Joris Ivens.

Flemish neoliberals remain hopeful about a separatist free-trade breakthrough, letting the 'best student in the Belgian class' flourish next to competitors in Poland or Latvia. To no avail, however: *anno* 2021, the Belgian state is still here, badly mismanaging the COVID crisis. But managing, nonetheless. It has to be said that the regional response to COVID was just as shambolic as the federal one. Beneath Belgium's so-called 'communitarian' crisis smoulders not only a medical or logistical crisis but above all a *political* one, affecting Belgium's party democracy at its core. Recently leaked memos of the 2019 governmental negotiations indicated Francophone Socialists' willingness to split between regions not only social security, but also labour-market policy and fire services. Hoping to secure its baronies in Brussels with a final pay out, the PS appeared willing to trade in the national achievements of the Belgian labour movement.

Some tough questions follow. As the Walloon example shows, behind the question of regionalization stands the more intimidating one of capital investment. The English North never acquired a form of proto-statehood that would allow it to practice a properly local developmentalism; it was forced instead into an amorphous form of rebellion, within a topsy-turvy electoral geography that never provided a platform for regional consciousness. A look at post-industrial regions that *did* gain this form of

statehood, however, is not comforting. In 2016, Walloon prime minister and Socialist Party leader Paul Magnette garnered laurels from the European left for his rebellion in the federal parliament against the imposition of the neoliberalizing EU–Canada trade deal. This act of resistance hid a structural dependency of the Walloon region on Flemish transfers, which have grown precipitously in the wake of federalization. Behind this lies the secular decline of Wallonian industry, unable to profit from containerization and shut out from the German-led Central European export boom.

In the UK, Labour’s debacle in the 2019 election led to a resurgence of calls for proportional representation and constitutional conventions, along with a rise in regional consciousness. Loyal to the Labourist tradition, the Corbyn movement always indicated its willingness to play within the parameters of the Westminster system. Its dressing-down in December 2019 did manage to crack this consensus. As Owen Hatherley tweeted, socialists ‘obsessed with sorting out the British constitution’ now did not simply seem like ‘wet ex-academic Marxists who had given up on socialism and decided nineteenth-century bourgeois politics would do’. Perhaps, in fact, ‘they were right all along’. Growing support for Scottish independence, strengthened by Johnson’s hard Brexit, has dragged the question of a polity for rump-England into the light of day. Against this, Alex Niven’s *New Model Island* has promoted socialist regionalism as the ‘sleeping giant’ who will arise to remake the UK—an antidote to the ‘dimly recalled nationalisms of the Middle Ages’, viz. Scotland, as much as an argument against ‘narrow Englishness’, aka ‘the cultural daydream of a neoliberal order’ that operates as a denial of more radical hopes and dreams.³²

Dreams of a British 1848 resurface here, with an interclass alliance between Chartists and Cobdenites jointly burying the old order. But Wallonia’s experience suggests that democratic federalization might simply bring Northern powerlessness out into the open—forcing a weak regional government to beg for crumbs at a distant Westminster table. After all, what resources are there to expropriate? What assets to tax? Looking even further north, what oil wells to drill? These exercises raise a more fundamental question: the supposed expiration of the Westminster

³² Alex Niven, *New Model Island: How to Build a Radical Culture Beyond the Idea of England*, London 2019, pp. 7–8.

model. As the estimated £12 billion refurbishment of the Palace of Westminster crawled forward, a right-wing commentator noted that the ‘gothic fantasia on the Thames’—‘the increasing decrepitude of whose architectural fabric is an almost too obvious metaphor for the British state itself’—could now hardly be restored ‘without bringing the whole structure crashing down.’³³ In the wake of Brexit, however—and despite Tory promises about new headquarters in Manchester—completing a delayed Europeanization-modernization of the British polity, *à la* Spaak, seems ever more unlikely. In a world where modernization has simply become a synonym for more neoliberalization, the new appears as just the latest version of the old—the ‘gothic fantasia’ unfit for purpose.

But unfit for what purpose? And unfit for whom? Already in 1991 Ellen Meiksins Wood criticized the Nairn–Anderson theses in *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism*, claiming that British decline remained the perfect emblem of capitalist development, not an outlier to the mean. An essential corollary of the theses, she argued, was that other late-developing capitalist countries were not subject to the same disorders because they were more ‘modern’ and their bourgeois revolutions more ‘complete’. Britain was a distillate of capitalist history, not a *Sonderweg* within it. In her reading, the inclination ‘to ascribe the failures of capitalism to its incompleteness, or to the backwardness of its political and cultural environment, appears to rest on certain very basic assumptions about its economic logic: capitalism, apparently, is by nature productive.’ Today, even a quick skim of Piketty would serve to undo such an illusion. Without external pressure, $r > g$ is simply the natural mode of operation for any capitalist class, from Moscow to São Paulo to London. As Wood might have put it: British regional inequality in this sense has less to do with a pre-modern backwardness than with the logic of capitalism itself.³⁴

Nevertheless, as Perry Anderson pointed out in reply to Wood, comparisons between Ukania and Belgium served to show that ‘similar beginnings can have rather different endings’ and ‘national fortunes are not just fates inscribed in industrial birth-certificates.’³⁵ Anyone casting a cold eye on the careers of Europe’s early industrializers would have

³³ Aris Roussinos, ‘The rot at the heart of Westminster’, *UnHerd*, 24 Nov 2020.

³⁴ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States*, London and New York 1991, pp. 13, 24, 163.

³⁵ Perry Anderson, *English Questions*, London and New York 1992, p. 337.

to agree. But birth-certificates are no execution warrants, either. Much like the North, it took Wallonia several decades to give up the ghost of carbon-based manufacturing. Along the way, it was able to defy capitalist gravity and achieve federal independence. Clemency was never an option, however, and regionalization has only worsened Wallonia's dependence within the fractious Belgian marriage. British decline *can* be attributed to a failure to modernize—lacking an English Spaak, but also weighed down by the debilitating success of the City. A type of federalism that the British left might treat as a mark of modernity did indeed save Wallonia from the bleakest forms of stagnation.

But the 'victory' here still is a pyrrhic one: globalization has not been stopped in its tracks and Belgian firms still have to compete in a hostile world economy. Regionalization shielded Wallonian workers from globalization, insofar as its political class could threaten a constitutional crisis if ever the North gave up its solidarity. But this very tactic was premised on the evasion of any systemic change in the Southern economy itself. It is often claimed that a federalized United Kingdom might offer the left more means of capital coercion, or at least stem the tide of ongoing privatization. But without the fiscal heft of the Westminster state, even freed of its constitutional strictures, coercing British capital to provide for its hinterlands will probably prove a thankless task. Just ask the Walloon Socialist Party.

The Northern question, as Hazeldine's account makes clear, is simply the most open pathology of an intrinsically pathological system. Without external discipline or coercion from below, post-war British capital went back into rentier mode and resumed its position as the trans-Atlantic casino owner. Arguments for popular-democratic economic nationalism never impinged upon Britain's ruling-class consciousness. An industrial-growth engine, they knew, always implied that the engine driver could pull on the brakes: this they would not countenance. *Retardataire* rentierism, with the City as the world's money manager, would remain preferable to industrial independence. But that is the capitalist default—not 'old regime pseudo-nationalism'. More than the symptom of an unconsummated modernity, Britain's Northern question indicates the inertia of every capitalist order, falling back on its safe spots when overcapacity or proletarian militancy threaten its profit margins. Like the US sunbelt, Flanders was able to capitalize on this transition by setting itself up as a warden for American multinationals. As the sister

regions of Liège, Pittsburgh and Detroit exemplify, however, a real solution to the Northern problem implies a solution to that most intractable of problems: capitalism itself.

What other politics are on offer in the comparative picture? Hazeldine shows how the North's three attempts at challenging the southern-based regime of landed-finance capital came to nought. Nevertheless, Northern discontents have remained highly consequential for the country's course. They tipped the Brexit vote in 2016 and (belatedly) settled scores with Labour. Is it conceivable that these energies could be channelled into a fourth counter-hegemonic project? Here, Belgium does offer some room for emulation. The Parti du travail de Belgique/Partij van de Arbeid (PTB/PVDA), founded in late 1970s as a small Maoist outfit, has grown into one of the most powerful forces on the Belgian—and European—left, after a long multicultural coma in the 2000s. As the last properly unionist party in the country—all the traditional parties having reorganized along regional lines—the PTB/PVDA has built up a strong base in Wallonia's post-industrial heartlands and nearly prised open the dead hand of the PS down there. It is gathering support in a more diverse Brussels. Surprisingly, it has also edged up to 10 per cent in a notoriously conservative Flanders.

Although realistic about Belgium's linguistic divides, the PTB/PVDA argues that modernization and regionalization are hardly a panacea for Belgium's woes. Instead, it seeks a full 're-federalization' for recently split social services and wants to strengthen Belgium's remaining unitary structure. The Belgian parliament should be elected by a single Belgian constituency, not split on language lines. Staunch defenders of Belgium's remaining welfare state, the PTB/PVDA has also taken up the cause of the country's numerous but hesitant trade-union movement, fatherless since the splitting up of the old pillars. The latter remains stuck in a craft unionism not unlike the one practiced by British workers after Chartism. But they did strike for a fairer deal after COVID-19 on 29 March, supported by the PTB/PVDA's many federal MPs who are themselves card-carrying union members. A British version of this scenario might be hard to imagine in 2021. But it would certainly make an alternative to more devolutionary fervour.