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**Bonapartism in The United Kingdom:
From Thatcher via Blair to Brexit**

My essay identifies two Bonapartist moments in post-war Britain in the context of the economic crises of the late 1960s and 1970s and the continuing structural crisis of the British state. These are the Thatcherite (1979-90) and Blair (1997-2007) moments. It contrasts these periods with the current situation, which is one of a catastrophic equilibrium with Brexit filling the symbolic role of Bonaparte as a promise of salvation from a growing organic crisis but that, materially, merely serves to deepen that crisis.

Marx and Gramsci on Bonapartism

The Eighteenth Brumaire provides a model for how to analyse conjunctures, the specificity and effectivity of political struggles, and disjunctions between political forces and economic classes. It also illustrates the role of the political identities, political discourses, and political forms of representation through which the class content of politics comes to be represented or, indeed, misrepresented. As a substantive exercise in historiography, the text offers a periodization of Louis Bonaparte's *coup d'état* on 2nd December 1851 based mainly on movements in parliamentary and party politics and the state apparatus as influenced by actions and events occurring at a distance from the state. Marx based this periodization on his observation of (1) the *political scene [politische Bühne]*, i.e., the visible but nonetheless »imaginary« world of everyday politics as acted out before the general public through the open and declared action of more or less well organized social forces (Poulantzas 1980: 247-9), which, far from being a simple political reflection of economic interests, has its own logic and influence on class relations; (2) the *social content* of the politics acted out on this stage, which involves a closer inspection of 'die rauhen Außenwelt' (18B: S. 173) based on looking 'hinter den Kulissen' (18B: S. 140) of the 'oberflächliche Schein, der den *Klassenkampf* und die eigentümliche Physiognomie dieser Periode verschleiert' (18B: S. 138); (3) changes in the *institutional architecture of the state* and its articulation to the wider public sphere -- electoral, parliamentary, presidential, bureaucratic, administrative, military, state-orchestrated mob violence, etc. -- that

directly condition struggles on the political stage, shaping particular strategies and tactics in wars of position and/or manoeuvre, including efforts to modify the state itself, and (4) the interconnected movements of the *local, national, and international economy* over different time scales insofar as these provide the social or material conditions of political struggles and shape the horizons of political struggle. These four closely interwoven theoretical objects guided a double periodization – of the transformation of the state and the evolution of the political scene. Marx divided the latter into three *Hauptperioden* in the Bonapartist regime, their sub-periods (or phases), and their links with successive steps in political class struggle (18B: S. 120). He discussed these issues in terms of their immediate conjunctural significance, the primary institutional site in and around which the political drama unfolds, and, as far as it was already publicly known, or Marx deemed it knowable, its future significance.

Gramsci drew on the spirit rather than letter of *Der Achtzehnte Brumaire* to develop a more flexible analysis of exceptional regimes that was adapted to the entry of the popular masses into politics after the 1870s and the development of the *stato allargato* (erweiterter Staat) in the 1920s and 1930s (Cospito 2016: 211-16; Buci-Glucksmann 1981: Kapitel 14; Jessop 2007). His *Gefängnishefte* elaborated increasingly refined analyses of specific historical situations based on careful reading of the conjuncture, shifting balance of forces, and offensive and defensive steps in class struggle. He conceived the state 'as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups' (Q13§17, S. 1584). He also emphasized the importance of taking error into account as well as the 'fact that many political acts are due to internal necessities of an organizational character; in other words, they are tied to the need to give coherence to a party, a group, or a society' (Q7, §24, S. 872). Like Marx, he stressed the scope for disjunctures between the economic structure and events on the political scene and rejected the temptation to explain political developments in terms of direct causal links to economic developments.

Historical Context and Conjunctural Shifts that Shaped Bonapartist Moments

The broad economic context domestically for the two distinct Bonapartist moments separated by phases of normalization, namely, Thatcherism and New Labour, was a

protracted crisis of Britain's flawed post-war Fordist economy and its insertion into the circuits of Atlantic Fordism and the world market. This crisis intensified from the mid-1960s onwards. Politically it was associated with crises in the state form and state strategies. Growth in other post-war capitalist economies had been secured in dirigiste regimes, corporatist regimes, and liberal regimes (vgl. Shonfield 1968). The British state lacked the capacities to engage in statist intervention, effective corporatist coordination, or a consistently rigorous laissez-faire line. Its interventions therefore oscillated uneasily among the three strategies that all failed in their own ways in different conjunctures (Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley, and Ling 1988). This structural and strategic crisis fuelled an organic crisis of the wider social formation. It also provided the context for the rise of Thatcherism as a neoliberal and neoconservative project with an authoritarian populist appeal and authoritarian statist tendencies.

The Periodization of Thatcherism

Thatcherism refers to '[t]he development and specificity of the emergent strategic line pursued by Thatcher and her various circles of political and ideological supporters' (Jessop et al., 1988: 8). Developing a strategic line involves selecting and ordering objectives; deciding on a pattern and sequence of actions deemed appropriate to attaining them; monitoring performance and progress; and adjusting tactics and objectives as the conjuncture changes. It does not imply logical consistency taken out of time and place, let alone an absence of political miscalculation. The Iron Lady was the charismatic figurehead who promoted a break with the post-war 'one-nation' conservatism that supported the Keynesian welfare national state, with its commitment to jobs for all and social democracy. But she did not break fundamentally with the power bloc or its social bases of support, notably those in southern England. On the contrary, the 'point of no return' in the rise of Thatcherism coincided with a conjunctural *rassemblement* of the power bloc as different social forces sought different routes out of an economic stalemate and organic crisis of British society. This is reminiscent of the remarks of Marx and Gramsci on Bonapartist moments:

Alle Klassen und Parteien hatten sich während der Junitage zur *Partei der Ordnung* vereint gegenüber der proletarischen Klasse, als der *Partei der Anarchie*, des Sozialismus, des Kommunismus. Sie hatten die Gesellschaft

„gerettet“ gegen „die Feinde der Gesellschaft“. Sie hatten die Stichworte der alten Gesellschaft, „*Eigentum, Familie, Religion, Ordnung*“, als Parole unter ihr Heer ausgeteilt (Marx: 18B: S. 123)

The passage of the troops of many different parties under the banner of a single party, which better represents and resumes the needs of the entire class, is an organic and normal phenomenon, even if its rhythm is very swift indeed almost like lightning in comparison with periods of calm. It represents the fusion of an entire social class under a single leadership, which alone is held to be capable of solving an overriding problem of its existence and of fending off a mortal danger [Q13 §23, S. 1604).

In short, Mrs Thatcher's Conservative party mobilized a new cross-class alliance against those identified with the post-war social democratic settlement and its alleged failures. In particular, it attacked the enemy within – organized labour. We might describe her Stichworte as „Eigentum, Familie, Marktwirtschaft, »Law and Order«“.

While Margaret Thatcher was no Napoleon I or Winston Churchill; was she a Louis Bonaparte? She was the first woman to become prime minister in Britain; had a domineering personality; adopted a 'conviction politics' approach to campaigning, and party leadership, won an unprecedented three successive election victories; and exploited more fully than most the powers available to the premier in Britain's unique form of unwritten 'elected dictatorship' in a highly mediated age.

Following Marx's approach to periodization we can distinguish several periods of the neoliberal regime shift that was introduced by Mrs Thatcher and survives to the present. For the moment, let mention: (1) the pre-history of Thatcherism up to the 'point of no return'; (2) an initial period of consolidation when the institutional framework and compromises associated with Britain's post-war settlement were *rolled back* in the name of the free economy and strong state; (3) a consolidated period when the neoliberal policy approach was *rolled forward*, in a more radical, confident manner relying on Mrs Thatcher's personal [Bonapartist] qualities and the potential for elected dictatorship inscribed in Britain's flexible, unwritten Constitution; (4) a period of '*blowback*' when negative economic, social, and political trends began to accumulate

and resistance mounted to the roll-forward phase – these led to an internal party coup against Mrs Thatcher, triggered by domestic failures (notably the “Poll Tax”) and divisions over Europe. A fifth period followed under the “steady hand” of the new and remarkably uncharismatic Conservative Premier, John Major. This provided relative political stabilization and normalized the neo-liberal legacies of the third and fourth periods. I discuss further periods in later sections.

The party coup against Margaret Thatcher’s leadership of the Conservative Party ended the domineering approach of the ‘Iron Lady’ and a conviction politics that had begun to overlook the need for managing parliament, press, and people. It did not end the social bases of support for the Thatcherite project or reverse its legacies. Support initially stemmed from Margaret Thatcher’s ability to express hitherto unvoiced petty bourgeois discontent with the post-war settlement and exploit disillusion with the Labour government, the unions, and visible economic decline. Moreover, from Thatcher’s first days in opposition almost to her final days in Downing Street, the press was overwhelmingly supportive. However, *pace* Stuart Hall et al. (1978), the authoritarian populist appeal of Mrs Thatcher and her Thatcherite colleagues and media supporters was less important to the long-run resilience of Thatcherism than its ability to consolidate institutional power through control of a centralized state and to engage in a war of position with a view to modifying the structural balance of power in state-economy-society relations. While measures to promote popular capitalism were part of the authoritarian populist moment of Thatcherism, there was also an authoritarian statist moment that strengthened the state and initiated draconian reductions in civil liberties. These are typical Bonapartist features.

Moreover, the neoliberal policies pursued by the Thatcher government and its successors reinforced de-industrialization and, where core industries survived, contributed to their splitting up among rival foreign capitals. Without the economic, political, and social bases for a concerted national economic strategy, Britain’s economic fortunes came to depend heavily on the vagaries of finance-dominated accumulation and the wider world market and a low-skill, low-tech, low-wage, and even zero-hour service sector associated with a neoliberal race to the bottom. Neoliberal policies and public investment decisions (including the regional allocation

of infrastructure projects) also intensified uneven development to the benefit of London and the rest of the South-East.

Tony Blair and the 'New Labour' Project

Tony Blair's New Labour initiative was a weak version of Margaret Thatcher's Bonapartism. But it would be misleading to equate him with Louis Bonaparte and the Iron Lady with Napoleon Bonaparte. In each case, their coups were not *military* but *party-political*. And they were both intended to reorder the state and its relation to the market economy and civil society along neoliberal lines. Thus New Labour marked a sixth period of authoritarian neoliberalism. The fifth period had normalized neoliberalism and secured relative political stability – although membership of the European Union still seriously divided the Conservative Party. However, resistance to neoliberalism was growing and its economic and political failures and damage to social cohesion were becoming ever more evident. Rather than providing an innovative 'third way' between neoliberalism and socialism, however, Blair's historic mission was quite different. As Marx noted, it is important to distinguish the "so-called" people's party' from a real people's party (18B: 55). For, in historical conflicts, one must 'distinguish between the fine words and aspirations of the parties and their real organisation and their real interests, their image from their reality' (18B: 56). Just as Louis Bonaparte had discovered the limits to the *Herrschaft der Prätorianer* and needed to rebuild the links between state and bourgeois civil society, Blair recognized the need to retreat from radical neoliberalism and rebuild the links between the authoritarian neoliberalism state and bourgeois civil society. This reflected the kind of conjuncture described by Gramsci as 'a static equilibrium' in which neither the conservatives nor the progressives have the strength for victory – the progressive forces lack maturity and even the conservative group needs a master (Q13, §23*, S. 1604). Tony Blair was that master. He demobilized progressive forces and provided the missing leadership for conservative forces.

What distinguished New Labour's approach from earlier periods was the political and social necessity in this static equilibrium to provide 'Third Way' flanking and supporting measures to keep the neo-liberal show on the road. This practical necessity was not confined to Britain but was part of the continuing reinvention of neoliberalism. But the

Third Way had a distinctive British inflection because of the distinctive legacies of Labour politics, the growing North-South divide, and the importance of Labour's northern heartlands to its electoral success even as New Labour grew more metropolitan. The main break with the broader strategic line of Thatcherism concerned its hegemonic vision more than its state project. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (his Chancellor of the Exchequer and, later, his successor as PM), supported a more 'one nation' social imaginary over the Thatcherite 'two nations' approach. But this 'nation' would not be re-united under the protection of the Keynesian welfare national state. Instead social cohesion would be secured mainly through labour market attachment (i.e., workfare, not welfare) and the regeneration of marginalized communities. In addition, individual, family, and child poverty would be alleviated mainly through a series of 'stealthy' (rather than proudly proclaimed) and targeted measures to redirect welfare spending within otherwise rigid fiscal-financial parameters. This conformed with, rather than challenging, the profit-oriented, market-mediated logic of neo-liberalism. In short, New Labour administered the legacies of Thatcherism as so many economically or politically irreversible *faits accomplis*. Thus, their pathologies continued to accumulate beneath the political surface and representational and political crises continued to develop – met with increasing centralization of power within the Labour Government, Parliamentary Party, and its national organs. In addition, New Labour policies reinforced previous trends towards financialization and finance-dominated accumulation.

The bell tolled for New Labour when the North Atlantic Financial Crisis erupted in 2007-2008. The measures it took to bail out the financial sector transformed a financial crisis into a fiscal crisis marked by rising public sector deficits that were ruthlessly exploited by the Conservative Party, the City of London, and right-wing press to discredit New Labour's hard-won reputation for economic competence. It also provided the excuse to move beyond the politics of austerity towards a 'state of enduring austerity'. This conjuncture was another threat to the rule of capital *and* another an opportunity to renew the neoliberal project. Responding to this *Vielfachkrise*, there was another *rassemblement* of economic and political forces to defend neoliberalism and roll it forward again – a phase in class struggle that can be called radical Thatcherism redux. The General Election in 2010 led to a coalition government comprising a large Conservative majority and support from the Liberal Democrats. This used the crisis as

an opportunity to make further inroads into what remained of the institutions that embodied the post-war settlement. This politics of austerity was more and more translated into the consolidation of an enduring austerity state and the growing polarization and precarization of the population. This was the economic and political background for the historic Brexit referendum.

Brexit as a Symbolic Bonaparte

There is a key difference between the conjuncture that enabled the rise of Thatcherism and the conjuncture in which the Brexit vote occurred. The organic crisis of post-war Fordism created the rassemblement of the establishment around a Louis Bonapartist Thatcher. Her regime could then exploit the potential for an elected dictatorship backed by plebiscitary elections that won key sections of the middle and working classes with the vehement support of the press (for a good recent analysis of the resulting class offensive, see Gallas, 2016). In contrast, the Brexit conjuncture reflected a long-running split in the establishment around Europe, increasing hostility to finance capital, a growing crisis of authority for political elites, a legitimacy crisis of the state, a worsening representational crisis in the party system, and an organic crisis in the wider society. Specifically, we can note:

1) Entry into and continued membership of the EU have proved a neuralgic point in British politics from the 1950s onward. The European question has divided people nostalgic for empire, nationalists, Atlanticists, Europeanists, and globalists in different ways at different times. Many of those involved in these debates relied on ill-informed nostalgia for a British imperial past and 'weltgeschichtlichen Rückerinnerungen' and took 'ihre Poesie ... aus der Vergangenheit' (18B: S. 117).

2) The loss of respect for the ruling classes (e.g. for corruption, cronyism, sleaze) and a loss in confidence among the ruling classes, enabled the disgruntled masses to enter politics as an autonomous (but fragmented) force, moving from passivity to making radical demands for change that were countered by populist appeals.

3) A legitimacy crisis as successive neoliberal projects failed to deliver nationwide prosperity and, in addition, created conditions for the financial crisis and austerity when the North Atlantic Financial Crisis erupted.

4) A growing disconnection between the natural governing parties in Westminster, their members and their voters. This representational crisis was reflected in support for Scottish Nationalism and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

5) A wider organic crisis in the social order, reflected in contestation over 'British values', disputed national and regional identities, north-south and other regional divides, the metropolitan orientation of intellectual strata, and generational splits.

6) An economic and financial crisis in the European Union, notably in the Eurozone, an intensifying democratic deficit in its political institutions, the hegemony of Germany in Northern Europe and its domination over Southern Europe, the economic migration and refugee crises, and, beyond Europe, the shift of the global centre of economic gravity to East Asia. These crisis-tendencies reinforced the view that British sovereignty and the United Kingdom's freedom to trade globally was being sacrificed to European political institutions.

Like Louis Bonaparte, Brexit was a floating signifier. Marx argued in *Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich, 1848 bis 1850*: »der einfältigste Mann Frankreichs die vielfältigste Bedeutung erhielt. Eben weil er nichts war, konnte er alles bedeuten, nur nicht sich selbst. So verschieden indessen der Sinn des Namens Napoleon im Munde der verschiedenen Klassen sein mochte, jede schrieb mit diesem Namen auf ihr Bulletin: Nieder mit der Partei des „National“, nieder mit Cavaignac, nieder mit der Konstituante, nieder mit der Bourgeoisrepublik« (MEW 7, S 45). In other words, different forces could project their own hopes and fears onto Bonaparte; he in turn skilfully manipulated and exploited this polyvalence to advance his own interests. The same is true of Brexit. Leaving the European Union was the “simplest” solution to Britain's problems and acquired the most varied meanings. Moreover, like the pure republican factor in the French parliament, which had no firm foundations in the social relations of production, but was »eine Koterie« of heterogeneous individuals and social categories, unified above all by »*französischen Nationalismus* ... Haß gegen die

Wiener Verträge und gegen die Allianz mit England« (18B: S. 124). In the case of the Brexiteers, there is a similar coterie of 'Tory backwoodsmen' (reactionary representatives from rural counties), little Englanders (isolationists), free traders, independent entrepreneurs, press barons, and others, unified by their hatred against the European treaties and the power of Germany.

These and other factors led David Cameron, the Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister, into errors of judgement in an attempt to defuse internal party dissent and undermine popular support for UKIP, exposing his party (and the country) to 'an uncertain future by demagogic promises' (Q13§23: 1603). This was a symptom of the political paralysis born of parliamentary cretinism and the fetishism of a misinformed, misguided plebiscite. »Der *parlamentarische Kretinismus*, der die Angesteckten in eine eingebildete Welt festbannt und ihnen allen Sinn, alle Erinnerung, alles Verständnis für die rauhe Außenwelt raubt, dieser parlamentarische Kretinismus gehörte dazu, wenn sie, die alle Bedingungen der parlamentarischen Macht mit eignen Händen zerstört hatten und in ihrem Kampfe mit den andern Klassen zerstören mußten, ihre parlamentarischen Siege noch für Siege hielten und den Präsidenten zu treffen glaubten, indem sie auf seine Minister schlugen (18B: S. 173)

Cameron did not expect to have to fulfil his promises — initially because he did not anticipate winning a parliamentary majority (with the result that the Liberal Democrats would have vetoed the referendum). Thus the clear Conservative victory in the 2015 general election was the immediate context for the tragi-comedy of errors played out in the referendum and thereafter. Even then, Cameron thought he could persuade voters to confirm British membership of the European Union through the same tactics as used in the referendum on Scottish independence: campaigning on a politics of fear. The problem with this tactic was that the power bloc had lost control over public opinion, the hinge between political and civil society, regarding the European Union. This reflected decades-long hostility from what became a vehemently and highly focused pro-Brexit press. This accounted for 82% of hard copy and on-line newspaper readers and it would normally support the Conservative party in elections even when positioning itself to the right at other times. This vehemence remains. Another key factor in swinging public opinion in these uncertain times was the alliance of those

'charismatic men of destiny', Nigel Farage (populist leader of UKIP) and Boris Johnson (the high-profile Conservative Mayor of London) (cf. Q13§23: 1603).

An interesting aspect of this Bonapartism without a Bonaparte is that Brexit has acquired its own erroneous and erratic momentum even under – or perhaps because of – the weak and fragile leadership of Mrs Theresa May. Cameron called the referendum for internal party reasons, lost it (he was a Remainer), and promptly resigned; Boris Johnson, the charismatic figurehead crucial to the Brexit victory, who had vacillated about which side to support to further his political ambitions, failed to replace him as Prime Minister (although he remains a key force pushing for a 'hard Brexit' or, even, a "No Deal Brexit", which would require Britain to trade on WTO terms); Nigel Farage declared that his mission had been accomplished and resigned as leader of UKIP (but still waits in the wings of the political scene); and Theresa May (who backed remain) is now a prisoner of the Brexiteers in her own party and the pro-Brexit press, growing visibly weaker by the day [at the time of writing, mid-November 2017]. The floating signifier has acquired a supernatural political force even as Brexiteers and Remainers fight over how to translate it into a material reality. This supernatural political force is grounded in a fetishized view of the Brexit referendum as a democratic decision of the electorate that must be respected, regardless of the narrow victory in a badly framed and misinformed vote and regardless of the constitutional norm that the Crown-in-Parliament and not the electorate is the locus of sovereignty. In addition, Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty allows for a request to leave the European Union to be withdrawn or for the negotiation period to be extended. Like Mussolini, whom Gramsci compared to 'the sorcerer's apprentice who has learnt the formula to call up the devil but does not know the one to send him back to hell again', politicians on both sides have conjured up forces they cannot control (Gramsci 1921). Thus, in contrast to the Bonapartisms of Napoleon I and his nephew or Mrs Thatcher and her adoptive nephew, which had clear economic foundations, wider political functions, and a plausible 'modernising' mission, Brexit is grounded in a chronic economic crisis, an organic crisis of the state, and a nostalgic mission to make Britain great again.

Brexit and the Continuing Organic Crisis of the British State

The UK government invoked Article 50 on 29 March 2017 to initiate negotiations about leaving the EU. Since then, capitalist circles continue to express worries about the impact of a hard Brexit (and even a soft Brexit), the Conservative Party remains divided on the right approach to Brexit, the population remains polarized, and the state is ill-prepared for the negotiations. It is increasingly evident that there are many worrisome dilemmas and 'wicked problems' involved in negotiating Brexit with the European Union and the other 27 member-states, delivering what its advocates promised and pro-Brexit voters expected, maintaining government unity and popular legitimacy, and ensuring a smooth transition and nationwide prosperity. Many member states and leading Eurocrats oppose special deals lest this encourage others to consider their own versions of Brexit. Some also resent the UK government's continuing special pleading, ambivalence, and sheer incoherence.

The choice posed in the referendum was misleading: the real choice should have been in or out of neoliberalism rather than in or out of the European Union. A key part of the popular discontent that led to the Brexit vote outcome had to do with the impact of neoliberal policies on the expansion of the precariat, uneven regional development, housing shortages, and a chronic crisis in the health service. The crucial issue that remained largely unvoiced in the referendum debate was that real or imagined crisis symptoms were not caused by membership of the European Union as such. Rather, they were rooted in its neoliberal form, the mobility of capital rather than labour, the crisis of Eurozone crisis-management, and the long-run failure to address crucial domestic issues that undermined economic and extra-economic competitiveness. Yet a choice for entry or exit would not affect the overall dominance of neoliberalism—only its specific form and mediations. A remain vote would have consolidated an authoritarian neoliberal Conservative regime committed to enduring austerity. Yet austerity is also being entrenched in preparation for potential shocks from Brexit and as part of the renewed commitment to reducing government debt. Paradoxically, whereas the Brexit vote did not pose these questions, the 2017 general election campaign did put them on the political agenda. The outcome of that vote deprived Mrs May's of her power to provide 'strong and stable leadership' to deliver a good Brexit.

However, because "Brexit means Brexit", a yes vote offered a leap into an unknown future. Success in the campaign seems to have turned on the demand to "take back

control” of Britain’s future. But this errs on three grounds. First, it referenced the loss of formal juridico-political (territorial) sovereignty to some supranational authority – not the need to regain temporal sovereignty in the face of superfast, hyper-mobile financial capital and predatory productive capital. “Remain and reform” might have offered a better solution to this loss of sovereignty – if the power of transnational capital inside the European Union can still be challenged. Second, the loss of sovereignty is grounded in the increasing integration of the world market and the dominance of transnational capital in the networked space of flows rather than in inter-state relations. This has territorial dimensions but many other spatio-temporal moments that Brexit cannot address. And, third, paradoxically, the UK government is now even more likely to sign “free trade agreements” that are, in fact, more concerned with consolidating the power of transnational capital vis-à-vis local, regional, national states (and the EU) in disputes over trade or other government policies that might impact their profits. This is not a route to ‘taking back control’.

The organic crisis of the British state has prevented the ruling class and governing elites from formulating a coherent strategy to defend the interests of dominant fractions of national and transnational capital while keeping a divided public content with the speed and outcome of Brexit negotiations. It has lost the ability to “*reabsorb the control that was slipping from its grasp*” (Q13 §23, S. 1603). The European Union has prepared a tough negotiating position and insists on securing agreement on the ‘divorce’, citizens’ rights, and the Irish Border before post-Brexit trade arrangements can be discussed. Future trade arrangements and the length of any transition period will take much longer to settle, both in procedural terms and in terms of their practical complexity. 40 years’ membership of the European Union, decades of neoliberal slimming down of the state, lack of consensus within the Cabinet, and divergent interests in the key parts of the state apparatus have left the government and state ill-equipped to negotiate and then implement new treaties and trade agreements (Rutter and McRae 2016). There are also growing concerns that the time and resources needed to negotiate Brexit will mean that many other urgent and longer-term problems will be neglected for two years or more.

The representational crises that contribute to Britain’s organic crisis have been exacerbated by the Brexit vote. This can be seen in the Conservative Party itself, with

bitter divisions between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ Brexiteers as well as a rump of hard-line remainers who have promised unrelenting opposition; these divisions also separate those who wish to prioritize immigration and opt for free trade deals around the world and those who want to remain in the single market at the cost of accepting free movement of labour. There is also a toxic split between the Blairite rump of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the wider party membership, which has several features of a social movement rather than a natural governing party. The organizational crisis in UKIP leaves it unable to reposition itself to capture northern working-class votes, especially when it loses its place inside the European Parliament and wider European Union. And, as noted, there are struggles between rival tendencies and parties in Scotland over its status in the UK and Europe; and, in Ireland, over the status of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

The legitimacy crisis is also still present and could worsen if public opinion, spurred on by the pro-Brexit press, becomes dissatisfied with progress and suspects a deliberate policy of backsliding on the part of government. There are growing signs of public discontent with the impact of austerity and these were especially evident during the 2017 general election campaign. In any event, the difficulties of negotiating Brexit will confirm the strategic incapacities of the political system. Indeed, Brexit appears to be a continuation of the organic crisis of the British state by other means.

The Eighteenth Brumaire Today

The Class Struggles in France, The Eighteenth Brumaire, and the reflections on the Civil War in France are three crucial texts – supported by Marx’s other writings on France – are unsurpassed examples of his materialist interpretation of history. They are more than a “first rough draft of history”, as journalism has been described; they are sophisticated structural and conjunctural analyses of specific periods in French and international economic, political and social developments that can provide us with powerful heuristic insights into how to research past and present history and draw important political lessons. Inspired by Marx’s work, Gramsci offered further refinements and developed a useful taxonomy of progressive and regressive forms of Bonapartism and Caesarism. In both cases we are offered theoretical insights into how to explain and interpret the complex, often disjointed, connections economic

structures, the political terrain, the changing political scene, the shifting balance of forces, the miscalculations and unforced errors of political parties and social movements, and the crucial role of political imaginaries (including political illusions and delusions). Thereby Marx and Gramsci contribute to a critique of political semiosis as well as political economy. While the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is most associated with Marx's analysis of the coups d'état of uncle and nephew (and the contrasts between them), it offers far more than this theoretically and politically. The Bonapartist conjuncture is a small but invaluable aspect of the broader project. It is more important to develop the project than to search for historical analogies – and, where these exist, they must be analysed in their own terms rather than as further repetitions, tragic or farcical, of some historical prototype.

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