



**The Northern Question: A History of a Divided Country by
Tom Hazeldine**

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Abstract

In this review of Tom Hazeldine's *The Northern Question*, David Civil explores how Britain's geographic cultural constructions and regional inequalities have impacted on the nation's politics from the Industrial Revolution to Brexit.

Biography

David Civil is the MHR's Spotlight Editor and completed his PhD in History on the concept of meritocracy in 2020.

A Northern parliamentary seat flipping in a by-election from Labour to Conservative for the first time in its history may immediately bring to mind recent, post-Brexit political developments. We might instinctively reach for the language of ‘left-behind’ voters or highlight the significance of ‘Red Wall’ constituencies to explain this unprecedented electoral shift. And yet this by-election in Workington took place in 1976. It saw the return of 35-year-old Richard Page for a Conservative Party under the new leadership of Margaret Thatcher. In 1979 the seat would return to Labour, until the 2019 General Election when it flipped to the Conservatives as part of their assault on the so-called ‘Red Wall’. The notion of ‘Workington Man’ appeared to capture the impact of Brexit in ripping apart old loyalties and traditional voting patterns. Yet as Page’s triumph in 1976 demonstrates, these developments have a long history. The Editor of the *New Left Review*, Tom Hazeldine sets out to explore this history in his recent book, *The Northern Question: A History of a Divided Country*. Post-Brexit Northern England, Hazeldine claims, has propelled itself to the ‘foreground of national attention for the first time since the socio-economic crisis of the Thatcher years’ (p. xii). By exploring the interaction between nation-state, social class and geographical region, *The Northern Question* hopes to ‘let some light in through several windows’ to illuminate a debate whose importance is only going to grow in the next decade and beyond (p. xiv).

Hazeldine’s historical survey begins in Chapter 2, framing the North as the ‘Badlands’ which for the most part refused to adopt the ‘intense feudalism of the Midlands and the South’ (p. 31). If the burdens of serfdom were ‘generally lighter’ in the North ‘rural benightedness – the absence of towns and literacy – was correspondingly deeper’ (p. 31). For Hazeldine, it is clear that evidence of Northern disadvantage vis-à-vis their Southern neighbour is visible even during the early modern period. Even under pre-modern conditions ‘not even a member of the royal line could scabble together quite enough strength in the North to reign in defiance of Establishment opinion’ (p. 33). In a theme that runs throughout *The Northern Question*, ‘the *sine qua non* of governing England was to have its southern heartland on side’ (p. 33). This whistle-stop tour ends with the historical event or

process which gave the North its defining characteristics in the national imagination: the Industrial Revolution. Chapter 3 traces how the forces of industrialism and revolt intersected throughout the nineteenth century as the exponential growth of the factory system was accompanied by Luddites, Chartists, and democratic reformers. Despite these upheavals, 'the pre-industrial mould of British politics remained unbroken, with fateful consequences for the North once its commercial fortunes began to slide' (p. 70). Drawing on Elizabeth Gaskell's 1854 novel *North and South*, Hazeldine claims that 'even in the land of long chimneys', business survival still hinged on the 'attitude taken by the traditional landowning and monied interests of the South' (p. 70). Chapter 4, focusing on the 'capital-goods phase of the manufacturing revolution', expands on these themes to demonstrate how despite the mirage of Northern prosperity, 'Liverpool and Manchester wealth holders were second only to Londoners in their readiness to put money into foreign undertakings'. It is at this point, at the start of the twentieth-century, that Hazeldine's 'declinist' thesis begins to emerge in full force: '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 nineteenth-century coal mines, textile mills, steelworks and shipyards' (pp. 72–73).

The repercussions of The First World War loosened Lancashire's grip on British India, the biggest outlet for its cotton goods. In Hazeldine's words, 'outpaced by late-start competitors in Europe, America and the Far East, dependent on imperial privileges approaching expiry, the world's first industrial region was about to experience the ground giving way beneath it' (pp. 89–90). Chapter 5, entitled 'Dereliction', gives an indication of Hazeldine's assessment of the British state's response. Despite the parliamentary breakthrough of the Labour Party, the two wings of the labour movement took turns to court disaster through the timidity of its leaders in the face of the General Strike and the Great Depression. By 1934 unemployment fell back to single digits in London and the South East but in the North and Scotland remained stuck above twenty percent (p. 93, pp. 105–06). It would take the full mobilisation of national resources over the course of The Second World War to reduce the concentration of economic activity in the South East and to achieve 'the rationalisation of Outer Britain that peacetime politics at Westminster

had singularly failed to deliver' (p. 113). Chapter 6 analyses how this rationalisation was squandered by both Labour and Conservative governments determined to keep the pound strong and British imperialism intact. Regional policy, as proclaimed by post-war governments of both stripes, came to involve 'merely a modest stimulus to private-sector investment and job creation, aimed at indemnifying the ruling parties against accusations of neglect, should slump conditions return to the industrial towns of northern England, Scotland and Wales' (p. 116). Instead of overhauling the Northern manufacturing base 'before the resumption of commercial competition from continental Europe and Japan', Hazeldine claims, Attlee was ploughing 'limitless amounts of money' into a 'clandestine nuclear-weapons programme' (p. 120, 115). This neglect, he argues, continued into the 1960s. Harold Wilson's modernisation programme, which helped the Labour Party win the 1964 General Election, was sacrificed, Hazeldine claims, on the altar of 'slavish monetary orthodoxy' (p. 134). Wilson's 'prolonged exposure to the official mind acculturated him to the innermost impulses of the British state, instilling a reverence for the monarchy, for centralisation and for the pound sterling' (p. 132). In Hazeldine's terms, throughout the twentieth century the representatives of labour were just as 'complacent as those of capital' (p. 122).

In relative terms then the North did not 'tread water' during the 'golden age of capitalism' and during the 1970s and 1980s, Hazeldine claims, 'it would be forced below the waterline, never to re-emerge' (p. 136). This intensification of Northern decline is explored in Chapters 7 and 8. As growth slowed and the seemingly existential crisis of stagflation began to grip the British economy in the 1970s, mass redundancies developed on top of existing regional disparities. Unemployment provoked a profound response from the industrial working-class and the 1974 'Who Governs Britain?' General Election which brought down the conservative government of Ted Heath represented a 'remarkable victory for the industrial ranks of Outer Britain' (p. 144). This working-class momentum was undone in Hazeldine's account, however, by conservative Labour governments led consecutively by Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan. An alternative political economy advanced by Tony Benn, the Secretary of State for Industry between 1974 and 1975, and

embodied in the Kirkby Manufacturing and Engineering cooperative, was ostracised in favour of 'sound money and an open market economy' (pp. 145–46). For Hazeldine, the Labour government's cowardice in the face of the forces of capital reached its apogee with the IMF crisis of 1976. This represented the moment that the financial crisis of the post-war state was 'resolved on City terms at the cost of a lingering recession in Outer Britain' (p. 150). In these chapters Hazeldine deploys his central argument with the greatest persuasiveness. By highlighting how social democrats like Callaghan and Dennis Healey laid the groundwork for neoliberalism, *The Northern Question* argues there was something inherent in the British state which meant that at regular historical intervals its default was to side with the forces of capital at the expense of the interests of labour. In this sense, by using the North as a lens, Hazeldine portrays Thatcherism more as an intensification or consolidation of pre-existing patterns of political economy rather than as a revolutionary ideology. In Hazeldine's account Thatcherism governed from the south and 'tightened the austerity introduced by Callaghan's Labour' (p. 159). Rather than portraying the period as a 'marketplace of ideas' where alternative visions of Britain's political economy competed for ascendancy, Hazeldine characterises the 1970s as one long march to free-market neoliberalism.¹

While this is a contestable interpretation of the ideological shifts of the 1970s and 1980s, the fact that neoliberalism consolidated its grip over British politics in the 1990s and 2000s is less open to question. The final two chapters of *The Northern Question* tells the story of this consolidation and brings the narrative up to the contemporary moment where neoliberal ascendancy appears to be assailed on all sides. Hazeldine's lens becomes a little blurred when exploring New Labour: on the one hand, he repeats familiar tropes that the Blairite Labour Party represented Thatcher's 'greatest achievement' (p. 177); on the other, he highlights how deindustrialisation in the North was 'buffered by the stimulants' of higher public spending, which increased by over six percent a year in real terms between 1999

¹ For the 1970s as a 'marketplace of ideas', see: P.A. Hall, 'Social Learning and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain', *Comparative Politics*, 5/3, (1993), pp. 275–96; D. Blackburn, 'Penguin Books and the Marketplace for Ideas', in L. Black, H. Pemberton & P. Thane (Eds.), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 224–51.

and 2006 (p. 180). These stimulants would quickly be withdrawn, however, following the 2008 financial crisis. The North East lost fourteen percent of its public sector workforce under the coalition while the South East shed less than three percent. Under David Cameron's prime ministership median household wealth in London increased by fourteen percent while it fell eight percent in Yorkshire and the Humber. For Hazeldine, Brexit and the 2017 General Election were consequences of these regional disparities. Three parallel voter insurgencies left their mark on the post-2008 distemper:

a Brexit revolt that originated in opposition to Maastricht among City mavericks and Tory voters in the market-town South, but then pivoted to attract northern working-class communities left behind by the New Labour boom and reeling from Conservative-Lib Dem austerity; the left-inclined 2014 Yes campaign for Scottish independence [. . .] and a Corbynist upsurge pitting a millennial precariat against a still largely Blairite Parliamentary Labour Party (p. 197).

While Corbyn managed to hold together an electoral coalition from amongst these various insurgencies in 2017—making the Labour Party's first Commons gains in a General Election in twenty years—this was achieved by capturing major Northern cities and obfuscation on Brexit. In the aftermath of the election the Brexit movement and the Corbynite Labour Party increasingly faced in opposite directions. The final chapter of *The Northern Question* entitled 'Taking a Stand' explores the consequences of this divergence. Considering his damning indictment of Harold Wilson's leadership of the Labour Party, it is surprising to see Hazeldine claim that Corbyn should have stuck to the 'Wilson model' of 'personal neutrality' over Brexit. In the end Corbyn and John McDonnell, 'pinned their economic programme to a Brexit stance indistinguishable from that of the London establishment against which a large part of the Leave vote had been directed' (pp. 212–13). In terms of seats, the General Election of 2019 turned on a Labour collapse in the deindustrialised small towns and former pit villages of the Midlands and the North. In these 'red wall'

regions, 750,000 Leave voters switched to the Conservatives while hundreds of thousands more stayed at home (p. 207). If it is straightforward to demonstrate that Brexit cut across traditional political loyalties and divisions, explaining why remains one of the most contested issues in contemporary Britain. Too many commentators rush to proclaim a loosely conceptualised cultural politics as the key dividing line, yet it is clearly more complicated than this. For Hazeldine, ‘Brexit handed a political weapon to a class and region that had been denied one by Labourist hegemony for so long’ (p. 220). Yet as Will Davies has recently argued, much of what is labelled ‘populism’ is ‘really a longing for some version of the state that predated neoliberal reforms’. The slogan ‘take back control’ appealed to older Brexit voters precisely because they could remember a time when the state was ‘in command of its own economy and able to deliver social security to its own citizens’, a product of the very ‘labourist hegemony’ that Hazeldine deplors.² Throughout *The Northern Question* post-war social democracy is attacked for its repeated capitulations to the forces of capital and characterised as an ideological formation that includes everyone from Dennis Healey to, staggeringly, Dominic Cummings who, Hazeldine claims, ‘wrapped the official Vote Leave campaign in social-democratic colours’ (p. 203).

While it is clearly possible to attack post-war social democracy for its failure to adequately subdue the forces of capital, the reduction of this changing, nuanced and electorally successful ideological formation to a handmaiden of capitalist power speaks to a broader problem with *The Northern Question*. Namely, that Hazeldine lacks a compelling explanation for why the North has been so neglected by successive governments or rulers over at least two centuries beyond the fact that the British state inherently sided with the forces of capital (a byword for ‘the South’) over those of labour (a byword for ‘the North’). Now there is of course a large amount of truth in this reasoning. British institutions proved uniquely adept at preserving the interests of landed and financial interests and co-opting dissenters to stifle unrest. While the interests of the North might have been consistently marginalised, however, they were marginalised for different reasons over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At its worst Hazeldine’s approach simply

² W. Davies, *This is Not Normal: The Collapse of Liberal Britain* (London, 2020), p. 16.

lumps social democrats and neoliberals together into a large amalgam called ‘the establishment’. By adopting Hazeldine’s perspective we learn nothing about the consequences of the profound ideological and conceptual shifts of modern British history; about the impact of the welfare state or the rise of the free market. This largely stems from Hazeldine’s ‘declinism’.³ *The Northern Question* is heavily indebted to the work of the political theorist Tom Nairn. Alongside fellow New Left intellectual Perry Anderson, Nairn advanced the thesis that the British polity was uniquely conditioned by the absence of a truly bourgeois revolutionary moment.⁴ Instead the aristocracy absorbed the emergent bourgeoisie from the early-nineteenth century, preserving the *ancien régime* and dooming any attempt at modernisation to failure.⁵ There is no acknowledgement in *The Northern Question*, however, to the fact that this thesis has been powerfully challenged in the intervening decades.⁶ Declinist critiques are bound-up with a variety of cultural assumptions about the nature of work, Britain’s place in the world and its transition to a welfare state. The latter, which played an important role in the development of Britain’s service economy, is barely mentioned by Hazeldine. In many ways, as the likes of Jim Tomlinson have argued, New Left critiques like *The Northern Question* end up mirroring a Thatcherite narrative of modern British history if for largely different reasons.⁷

At the start of his account, Hazeldine informs the reader that to understand the North we must ‘delve into the politics of Westminster and Whitehall, observing these proceedings from a northern perspective, to see what English history looks like when stood upon its head’ (p. 23). Later on, he is critical of recent ‘party-political musings’ which, while treating the North as a significant electoral player, tend to project southern assumptions onto the region. These musings, he

³ For the notion of ‘declinism’ see: J. Tomlinson, ‘Thrice Denied: “Declinism” as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 20/2 (2009), pp. 227–51.

⁴ See for example: T. Nairn, ‘The British Political Elite’, *New Left Review*, 23 (1963), pp. 19–25; P. Anderson, ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, *New Left Review*, 23 (1963), pp. 26–53.

⁵ For a good overview of this account, see: R. English & M. Kenny, ‘Public Intellectuals and the Question of British Decline’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3/3 (2001), pp. 259–83.

⁶ See for example: D. Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁷ Tomlinson, ‘Thrice Denied’, p. 235.

claims, 'are not the same as asking what the region itself wants' (p. 214). Yet voices from the region are exactly what *The Northern Question* lacks.

The most engaging sections of the book are those where Hazeldine explores the cultural products of the region, from the 'Angry Young Men' of the late 1950s to the 'feel-good musicals of the New Labour boom' embodied in *The Full Monty* (p. 220, 18). By the end of *The Northern Question*, it is difficult to know what the North is beyond a byword for industrialism and manufacturing or to identify what makes it distinct. This partly stems from Hazeldine's materialist approach and partly from the reductionism of the North-South binary itself as a lens. A much more fruitful approach would be to explore how this division of Britain became ingrained in the national imagination, compressing other regional or local identities. The Midlands, for example, is rarely the subject of such historical scrutiny. Where the Midlands is cited, it is usually grafted onto the North or South and rarely treated as a region in its own right. Hazeldine falls prey to a similar trap. 'On a statistical basis', he argues, 'much more of the Midlands belongs on the northern side of the regional divide' (p. 13). Hazeldine acknowledges that cities like Birmingham followed their own 'distinct trajectory' and has a 'different story to tell' than that explored in *The Northern Question* (p. 14). Yet he is forced to acknowledge where significant movements and processes spill over from ill-defined, contested and largely imagined regional boundaries. While it is undoubtedly true to say that the North-South divide continues to dominate discussions of regional inequality in modern Britain, there is a pressing need to explore the Midlands as a space of identity formation and political upheaval. The recently launched 'Midlands Identities Project', a one-day interdisciplinary conference supported by both *The MHR* and the Institute of Historical Research, could therefore not be timelier.

While the North-South divide might be an unrepresentative cultural construction, it undoubtedly retains a considerable grip over the national political, economic and cultural imagination. Hazeldine concludes *The Northern Question* with a powerful fact: the contemporary North accounts for one-quarter of the UK's population and parliamentary constituencies as well as one-fifth of its GDP. While these economic indicators may be trending downwards, they do so from a great

height. In this sense, Hazeldine argues, 'the problem of the North isn't going away anytime soon' (p. 222). The North may benefit 'from open bidding between the major parties for support' but it is far from clear that it will settle for what Hazeldine identifies as the 'post-war norm': the 'dispensing of palliatives to take the edge of structural economic change' (p. 214). If his book fails to grapple with the contradictions and contestations inherent in Britain's image of the North today, as well as amongst those who live there and lay claim to a Northern identity, Hazeldine's historical survey is a timely reminder that the contours and constraints of contemporary politics are always liable to change, often in unexpected and surprising ways.

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