

The man doesn't actually like beer

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Nigel Farage often gestures to his love of pints and the pub – specifically Wetherspoons – and understands the use of these spaces for populist nationalism. Those who wish to counter such currents must pay serious attention to the place and realities of the pub, remaining attentive to ideals beyond grievance as they do so.

In June 2024, Nigel Farage surprised nobody as he performed a U-turn to announce he would run as the Reform Party candidate in the general election for the seat of Clacton, a deprived seaside town in Essex. The former UKIP and Brexit Party leader made this announcement from London, prompting the following exchange.

Reporter: Is this proof that you care more about the London media than you do about your future constituents?

Farage: Are you coming to Clacton at 12 o'clock tomorrow?

Reporter: Why do it here in London?

Farage: Because this is where you all are. And you hate leaving your little bubble... I don't mean that. You're very welcome to come to Clacton tomorrow. There's a very good Wetherspoons.

Farage's practised anti-metropolitan barb, clinched by a claim to the pub, was duly followed the next day by a visit to Clacton, where he stopped at the Moon & Star, the town's beachfront Wetherspoons pub (it was on exiting the Moon & Star that Farage was showered with a milkshake by a protester).

Farage's knowing weaponisation of Wetherspoons was more than just a homage to Tim Martin, the Wetherspoons proprietor, Knight of the Realm and prominent Brexiteer. It appealed to Farage's wider status as a public school-educated commodities trader turned self-styled everyman – the sort of politician you would want to go for a pint with, someone brash and honest, who gets it. Marina Hyde, columnist for *The Guardian*, wrote back in 2013 that she would rather get a pint with him than any other political leader. 'The smaller British politics gets, the more it feels that you might as well judge a politician by that key question: could you honestly bear to have a pint with them? I could bear to have a pint with Nigel Farage.'¹ She did, in fact, go on to have a beer with Farage, if not a pint, which she enthusiastically chronicled in a subsequent *Guardian* column.²

Hyde might have seemed uncritically enamoured by his political act, but Farage has been accused by members of his own party of 'not even liking beer'. One Brexit Party source ruefully revealed to the *Daily Star*, 'The truth is the man doesn't actually like beer. He just drinks it to be seen with it.' Farage's allegedly real drink of choice? Red wine or cava.³ But whatever his hypocrisy may amount to, and despite his well-documented elite past, Farage successfully reinvented himself as perhaps the key figure within the British political and media landscape. And central to this cosplay has been his successful fashioning of himself as a straight-speaking, cigarette-smoking pintsman. As Hyde affectionately summarised, the man of the City comes across as an 'affable, pint-toting anti-politician.'

There is something in all this that warrants more considered attention. It is still a common reflex among many, when confronted with the increasingly confident electoral menace of Reform, to find comfort in certain enduring assumptions. It is assumed that in the final instance, Reform is only ever a politics of scapegoating, where private 'ressentiment' in the face of so much routine humiliation and precarity is converted into an electorally potent politics of racial resentment.⁴ This is the 'perpetual grievance machine' – one day the EU, the next Net Zero, and always Muslims and immigrants – that will get found out if and when it finds itself in government. The party's recent gain of ten councils is perhaps a prelude to a wider disarray.⁵ For all the alarmism about ULEZ, EDI and the largesse of hotels where the world's wretched are wined and dined at the honest Englishman's expense, there is seemingly nothing deeper to anchor such a rage-bait populism. And ultimately, many still believe, Reform's not-so-well-disguised designs on the NHS will finally be exposed, conclusively undermining their credibility as custodians of the national legacy and squandering their claim on the common man.

There is of course much to sympathise with here. Not so much comfort perhaps, but an enduring hope that the exposure of populist firebrands to the hard glare

of statecraft is necessary for a dialectical renewal of a hard-earned rationalism that recentres material questions. There is also a sense that Reform is the mere plaything of opportunistic political grifters – elites steeped in Thatcherite orthodoxies who merely moonlight as tribunes of the new sans-culottes, hailed today as provincial England's so-called 'white working-class'. It is also intimated that Reform's striking anti-democratic impulses, where the party operates as a PLC driven by a cult of personality and final decision-making powers reserved in effect for the Directors, will ultimately frustrate its ability to scale up.⁶ Surely then it is already upon its very arrival an exhausted project, only ever suited to haranguing loudly from the margins.

Farage's pub antics do, however, tune us to a different key, suggesting that the appeal of this populist nationalism lies elsewhere. Not so much in the organised promise of material improvement but in the restaging of which passions and attachments actually matter. That beneath all the bloviation, Reform, and Farage in particular, remains adept at harnessing a particular symbolism and moral calculation that is ultimately nationalism's strong suit. That amid all the hateful passions, they also channel an implicit if futile yearning for a communitarian ethos that promises solace, meaning, and companionship, even if necessarily demarcated by the borders of nationhood, both real and symbolic.

In other words, it is worth appreciating that some look to a renewed nationalist common sense as an alternative, or at most as a complement, to the paranoid logic of resentment. Lurking outside of the Thatcherite and/or low tax-low regulation tribute act of its political custodians, there is a distinctly postliberal vein that courses through this newly consolidated ideological terrain. This being a terrain that unites Reform with Blue Labour, in whose image Starmer's Labour government seems to be moulded; ties the anti-capitalist 'virtue ethics' of the late Alasdair McIntyre⁷ with the communitarian Toryism of Danny Kruger;⁸ and combines the messy, abrasively diagonalist⁹ musings of UnHerd with the hyper-politics¹⁰ of GB News. That is to say, all this rejuvenated nationalist desire is also affirmative; where exhumed appeals to nationhood and its attendant proxies – the family, gender propriety, and the provincial neighbourhood – offer a different kind of stabilising promise. Particularly decisive here is the emphasis on the lapsed virtues of national integrity, construed as the vigour, balance and camaraderie of thick affective ties alongside the ordering attributes of a shared destiny and coherent cultural identity.

What of the pub amid all this? Farage's very pointed play to the pub may appear terribly hammy and kitsch, but it is one of the marked through-lines of his career. Farage's post-Brexit/pre-Reform political hiatus was spent issuing highly lucrative political insights for his 'Talking Pints' GB News show. Staged in a mock-up studio pub, he invited an array of guests ranging from Priti Patel, who opted for a gin and tonic, to Paul Elliott, one half of the once ubiquitous Chuckle

Brothers. And just this May, Reform's takeover of Blackpool's Talbot Conservative Club promptly saw it converted into a Reform pub, the first of its kind in the UK. It being a pub is no idle choice. It readily invokes the pub's supposed centrality to the nation, imagined as a quintessentially English social space, where quintessentially English sociability transpires. Crucially, and just as potently, this occurs within a context where both England and the pub are said to be under threat. The English pintsman, 'left behind' by the winds of change, with economic globalisation and ruinous climate levies on the one hand, or multiculturalism and deracinated liberal metropolitanism on the other, while pubs are closing at record rates.

Resisting any lapse into snobbish derision, there is a more searching observation that might be advanced here. If taking Farage, Martin, and the more general poetics of new right politics seriously, the pub might be productively construed as a revealing metonym for the wider political philosophy that anchors nationalist claim-making in general. The pub is therefore not simply a symbolised motif of Englishness, though it is that too. But rather, the pub also acts as the stage for the sort of sociability and warmth that national unity is said to make possible. Put differently, the pub, in the nationalist imagination, is also a proxy for the very basis by which ethico-political community is rendered possible, where it is a common identity that brings through the social camaraderie that is necessary for solidaristic politics. Not solidarity for solidarity's sake, but solidarity as the natural effect of national fellow-feeling.

Of course, this aggressive casting of the pub as a proxy for English companionship but also therein English resentment does routinely shape the vernacular sensibilities of its punters too. It is in this context, that *Times* journalist Harry Wallop's visit to a 'Spoons in Birmingham in 2024 yielded the following exchange,

*Steve Barlow, 59, works in the post room of a bank and is on the Doom Bar. 'Tim Martin has always fought the corner of the working class', he says, jabbing his finger at my chest in an emphatic if friendly way. 'At the end of the day, people here just want to drink, have a conversation and not be barraged by diversity.' His friend John Laurence ... taps me conspiratorially on the shoulder and says, 'The Englishman is finished.'*¹¹

It is not that such sentiments are the only sentiments one would find at a pub. But it is revealing that Steve and John can casually enlist Wetherspoons and Martin as allies and self-explanatory reference points in a political lament. This sense of the pub as being a refuge, spared the tyranny of diversity missives and coerced inclusion, is hardly without consequences. When this plucky pair consider their Wetherspoons as their final resting place, the sufficiently carpeted burial tomb of Englishmen, it perhaps explains the mischievously Islamophobic

suggestion by a Reform Party campaigner, in the build-up to the 2024 General Election, that mosques be ‘turned into Wetherspoons.’¹²

The Good Life

It is here, however, in spite of such staunchly racist foreclosures to what the pub might be, that another trajectory might still be probed. As opposed to vacating pubs and other often economically beleaguered mainstays of mundane social community as the condemned preserve of Reform’s angry melancholy, leftist common sense might do well to stake its own claims to the terrain. That is to say, leftist politics might also rediscover its claims to leisure and cheek-by-jowl sociability, asserted separately or alongside its core commitments to equality, rights and freedom. In other words, leftist anti-racism might also restate itself as a politics of softer shared pleasures through which many people understand their own sense of a life well-lived beyond the self-frustrating individualism of endless market competition and social media-aided atomisation.¹³ And where claims to the pub or whatever else are not only seen through the distorting prisms of white loss and national decay, but as sites at which people, mostly working and lower middle-class, are continuously rehearsing forms of being together beyond the false allure of individualistic gratification or identity-based suspicion.

More specifically, what we as authors of a forthcoming book on pubs are attempting, indulgent afternoon drinking aside, is a style that works beyond the subversive gesture – read as the quest for spaces or networks that are in direct opposition to the so-called mainstream, always but impossibly alternative. The political theorist and dogged socialist activist, Jonas Marvin, recently suggested the millennial left has long neglected questions about the Good Life, in preference for persistently rationalist claims on material uplift and rote admonitions of the venality of neoliberals. As he concludes, ‘A vision of the Good Life must prioritise interdependency against the productive/parasitic divide. It must seek to re-conceptualise space and time around leisure, care and public affluence against loneliness, sickness and privatised luxury.’¹⁴ Though his canvas, at least as a starting point, is much more ambitious than ours, Marvin convincingly invites all of us to make more of the commonplace instances of the Good Life already available, underscoring the non-capitalist and even latently socialist, and the non-nationalist and even latently solidaristic, tempos that are still such a feature of our routine lives, if one looks carefully enough.

Our own efforts have routed this question, banal as it may seem, to the significance of pubs. Our forthcoming book looks to prise the pub as sites of working-class sociability that are not summarily moored to a cliff edge of racial resentment and nationalist mythmaking. They exist, instead, simply as often

quiet familiarities where space is shared in the proximity of others in companionable ways and where the individual is de-burdened of the self. After all, such places are claimed by our ethnonationalist adversaries precisely because they are indeed interesting places – socially productive places that speak to ordinary pleasures that sit outside of individualised competition and the endlessly narcissistic anxieties of self-improvement.

If anything, claims to England and nationhood as somehow underwriting such social respite is a gross distortion of what actually colours our social landscape and what actually happens within pubs across England. Here, the ‘desi pub’ offers a useful starting point for us (admittedly, in part because Amit’s father was a pioneering landlord of one such pub).¹⁵ Broadly understood as Indian-run, sometimes Indian-owned (typically Punjabi) pubs that emerged out of the determined challenges to racist colour bars, these pubs that have their roots in the 1960s Midlands (from Leicester to Smethwick) offer a welcome counterpoint to the pub as Englishness. The *convivial* nature of these pubs are a central part of their importance. They are not pubs for British Asians alone, a defensive enclave where exclusions at the hands of embittered white racism are escaped through a staging of one’s own pristine homogeneity, and nor are they selling an upmarket lifestyle. Desi pubs are decidedly ordinary. They are places that serve cheap food and drink to largely working-class clientele. In David Jesudason’s *Desi Pub* guide book, he notes how it was the white working-class patrons who caught his eye in Smethwick, the Midlands town where Peter Griffiths once ran his notoriously racist campaign but is now a hotbed of desi pubs. As Jesudason writes, describing Smethwick as his ‘Wakanda’, referring to the fictionalised utopian homeland of the popular Marvel character Black Panther:

When I first visited Smethwick in the West Midlands, I was taken aback, not only by how this was an Asian-majority town dealing with a post-industrial world, but how the white population loved their – and ‘their’ is crucial here – desi pubs. They lived lives far removed from gentrified areas, with many friends who were Asian, and even knew a smattering of Punjabi. Instead of running away or complaining about ‘immigration’ these ordinary people embraced change and discovered their lives could be enriched by it.¹⁶

Importantly, when Jesudason proclaims ‘Smethwick is my Wakanda’ because most of the pubs are owned by British Indians, this is not nationalist yearning, but rather reflects the fact that Asians were once excluded from Smethwick’s pubs, making this staging of humdrum working-class reinvention at the time unthinkable.

For many it won’t be pubs that are important, but as the cultural critic Sita Balani summarised in a recent essay, delicately titled ‘Not normal but ordinary’, there is an analytic adjustment that behoves us all. Circumventing the nor-

mal-versus-woke culture war binaries that stymie our common sense, Balani identifies the notion of the ordinary as a useful alternative. A reactionary stand-in for the ‘restoration of an uncontested majoritarianism’, the rejuvenated injunctions to be normal are experienced defensively, a set of anachronistic ideals that many struggle to live up to. The ordinary by contrast refers to our everyday lives when experienced as satisfyingly unremarkable, helping capture the routine bonds, familiarities and mutualities that unfold in our leisure and residential lives in ways that are dislodged of the otherwise paranoid scrutiny about who is normal and who isn’t, who is proper and who isn’t. As she concludes, in light of what today’s revanchists offer, the ‘interstitial leisure spaces of pubs, parks, gyms and shared residential worlds, not least what remains of social housing’, must become again our analytic domain, remaining attentive to ideals beyond grievance that are suggestive of other companionships outside of the nation, race, and other defensive identities.¹⁷

In opposition to English nationalism’s corrosive claims on our sense of pleasure and affirmation, we would do well to defend everyday attachments to being simply ‘ordinary’, without surrendering to the insistent demands of being ‘normal’. In this, we can make a case for leftist vernacular virtue that escapes the angry futility of nationhood. When the ‘man doesn’t even like beer’, we might go further and suggest that there is nothing in what Farage offers that actually redeems England. And it is, in fact, our alternative staking of everyday virtue that stands to draw out more hopeful possibilities for the nation, and the pub too.

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Notes

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- 17 Sita Balani, 'Not normal but ordinary: Living against the culture wars', *Radical Philosophy* 218, Spring 2025, p12.