Article

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From solidarity to self-promotion? Neoliberalism and left politics in the age of the social media influencer

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to map the contested intersections of influencer culture and left/progressive politics within the current conjuncture. Furthermore, drawing on a combination of Gramscian and Foucaultian insights, the article considers the implications of these intersections for how we theorise the relationship between neoliberalism and left politics. In so doing, my argument is threefold. First, I suggest that social media influencers and influencer activists have turned to various forms of left politics as a means of establishing a distinctive personal brand, and heightening their social media clout. Second, I suggest that these developments have been met with something of a backlash among some left commentators, wary of the superficiality – and privileging of self-promotion over solidarity – that influencer activism entails, in keeping with a broader disaffection with what some consider to be the excessively individualistic flavour of contemporary forms of online 'identity politics'. Third, I note that left critics of influencer activism often posit a distinction between 'proper' – that is, materialist, solidaristic – left politics, on one hand, and superficial, individualistic influencer activism, on the other. But, drawing on a conception of neoliberalism inspired by Foucault's 1979 lectures, I suggest that, in a neoliberal digital capitalist context, this distinction becomes hard to sustain. This argument has two further implications. First, it becomes very difficult to extricate oneself from the imperatives of neoliberal digital culture, even if one is politically opposed to neoliberalism; and, second, the figure of the social media influencer, far from being exceptional or anomalous, is merely a more overt or extreme manifestation of logics that are already endemic in contemporary cultural and political life.

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The relationship between left politics and neoliberalism is a long-standing concern within critical theory and wider Marxist and post-Marxist scholarship: indeed, it can sometimes feel as if there is little new that can be said about neoliberalism. This article, however, contends that a revisiting of the left politics/neoliberalism nexus is both urgent and necessary. Speaking primarily to the contemporary British context, and adopting a theoretical approach that draws on both Gramscian and Foucaultian insights, I argue that there are key elements of contemporary political culture which, as well as being crucially important on their own terms, have profound implications for how we conceptualise neoliberalism, and in particular, its relationship with anti-capitalism, anti-racism and feminism.

The first of these is the re-emergence of left politics as a key feature of British politics in the years since the 2008 crash, epitomised most clearly by Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party from 2015 to 2019. However, the Corbyn-led Labour Party is only part of the story: the past decade has also seen a renaissance of left/progressive ideas within wider culture and society, thanks in part to a cohort of young people embracing socialist ideals in response to intergenerational injustices concerning issues such as housing and employment (Milburn 2019). Although the Labour left is not the force within electoral politics that it was prior to 2019, the legacies of Corbynism, alongside heightening generational cleavages, mean that there is still a lively cohort of predominantly young, left-leaning citizens, who have remained a prominent constituency within wider political culture, especially online, in the post-Corbyn era (Dean 2023a).

The second key element concerns what we might call the 'celebritisation' of everyday life, politics included. In the social media age, celebrity has permeated out from the hitherto inaccessible worlds of the rich and famous, into the everyday lives of ordinary citizens, with profound implications for democratic politics. Celebrity has mutated, as Graeme Turner (2013: 94) explains, 'from being an elite and magical condition to being an almost reasonable expectation from everyday life' . This is perhaps best exemplified by the rise of the phenomenon of micro-celebrity and the concomitant rise of so-called social media influencers. There is already an extensive literature in media and communications examining these phenomena (see, e.g. Abidin 2016; Marshall 2010; Marwick 2013). There is also a burgeoning body of work examining right-wing influencer culture (Finlayson 2022; Lewis 2020), but the relationship between left politics and influencer culture has yet to be afforded sustained scholarly treatment.

At first glance, the dearth of research on left-wing influencer culture might not surprise us. After all, one might reasonably assume that any left politics would stand squarely in opposition to the acquisitive individualism associated with influencer culture. However, this article contends that we cannot meaningfully understand the current shape, style and character of contemporary Anglo-American left politics without an appreciation of the wider logics of (micro-)celebrity in which it is implicated. Thus, the aim of this article is to map the contested intersections of influencer culture and left/

progressive politics within the current conjuncture, and to consider the implications of these intersections for how we theorise the relationships between left politics and neoliberalism. In so doing, my argument is threefold. First, I suggest that social media influencers have turned to various forms of left/progressive politics as a means of establishing a distinctive personal brand and heightening their social media clout, reflected in the rise of so-called 'influencer activism'. Second, I outline how these developments have been met with something of a backlash among some left commentators, wary of the superficiality – and privileging of self-promotion over solidarity – that influencer activism entails: a phenomenon caustically dubbed 'intersectional Thatcherism' by left-wing journalist Ash Sarkar (2021). This wariness of influencer activism on the British left is symptomatic of a broader disaffection with what some consider to be the excessively individualistic flavour of contemporary forms of online 'identity politics'. Such critiques are, I suggest, part of a wider call among academics and activists on the Anglo-American left for a more thoroughgoing embrace of coalition-building and solidarity – often via a call for a re-engagement with questions of class – in contrast to the perceived narcissism and superficiality of influencer activism.

However, my third argument suggests, perhaps a little provocatively, that these recent critiques misconstrue the nature of the connection between left politics and influencer culture. Left critics of influencer activism often posit a distinction between 'proper' – that is, materialist, solidaristic – left politics, on one hand, and superficial, individualistic influencer activism, on the other. But I suggest that, in a neoliberal digital capitalist context, this distinction becomes hard to sustain. This argument has two further implications. First, it becomes very difficult to extricate oneself from the imperatives of neoliberal digital culture, even if one is politically opposed to neoliberalism and, second, the figure of the social media influencer, far from being exceptional or anomalous, is merely a more overt or extreme manifestation of logics that are already endemic in contemporary cultural and political life.

The article begins by situating the study within a geographical, theoretical, methodological and disciplinary context. It then goes on to map current debates about digital capitalism, and the relationship between left politics (broadly conceived) and neoliberalism. I then offer a broad overview of the intersections of left politics and influencer culture, before examining recent discourses about influencer culture among left-leaning British political commentators. I contextualise these critiques of influencer activism within a broader rejection of individualistic and identitarian forms of politics on the British left. The final substantive part of the article then offers a Foucaultian critique of these discourses by situating debates about influencer activism within the broader logics of neoliberal digital culture.

Situating the study: 'generation left', micro-celebrity and influencer culture

The analysis offered in this article responds to recent changes in the nature and character of left politics. Its geographical focus is primarily on the United Kingdom (or, rather, England, given the different contexts for left and progressive politics in Scotland, which

is overdetermined by the constitutional question). However, the ideological contours of left politics in England and the wider United Kingdom extend beyond national boundaries, especially with regards online content and engagement. For instance, political topics originating in the United States – as well as specific individuals and styles of discourse – have permeated into UK left discourse, to such an extent that the article's UK-focus, of necessity, also requires a consideration of examples which, while emerging from the United States, have nonetheless seeped into left discourse in the United Kingdom.

Indeed, the influence of American left discourse in the United Kingdom in part reflects their not dissimilar trajectories in the post-2015 period. In both countries, the increasing prominence of popular veterans of the left – Sanders in the United States, Corbyn in the United Kingdom – coincided with a wider resurgence of explicitly left-leaning political engagement, both online and offline, particularly – but not exclusively – among the young. In the United Kingdom, for instance, there is widespread evidence to suggest that younger voters have increasingly turned to left-wing policies and ideas amid intensifying generational inequality. Keir Milburn's 2019 text *Generation Left* documents these processes in detail. He contends that

> age has emerged as the key dividing line in politics. Young people are much more likely to vote Left and hold left-wing views, while older generations are more likely to vote Right and hold conservative social, and increasingly political, views. (Milburn 2019: 1)

Milburn's claims are supported by recent survey data: a 2021 report commissioned by the right-wing think tank the Institute for Economic Affairs entitled *Left Turn Ahead* found widespread support for left/socialist ideas among young voters in the United Kingdom, with the headline finding that '67 per cent of younger people say they would like to live in a socialist economic system' (Niemietz 2021: 7).

In offering a preliminary mapping of the cultural politics of 'generation left', I intentionally adopt an expansive understanding of what is meant by 'left'. Rather than restricting 'left' to organised manifestations of working class struggle (be they reformist or revolutionary), I use left politics in a broad sense – inspired largely by Norberto Bobbio (1996) and Eschle and Maiguashca (2014) – to refer to various forms of egalitarian and anti-hierarchical politics, including, but not limited to, socialism, anarchism, feminism, anti-racism, queer politics, disability politics and struggles for trans rights. This means that I categorise as 'left' any mobilisation around, or expression of resistance to, any socially constructed hierarchy. While some may argue this sets the bar for what counts as 'left' rather low, it helps shed light on the complex interactions – as well as disconnections – between different sites and issues of struggle and contestation. It also helps us understand the at times confusingly porous boundaries between left politics and its opponents: consider, for example, Jemima Repo's (2020) analysis of 'feminist commodity activism', whereby explicitly left feminist sentiment (e.g. images and slogans from Audre Lorde) is commodified and sold to feminist consumers, leading to an uneasy intermixing of principled left feminist commitment, capitalist profit-seeking and neoliberal self-branding. A further implication here is that 'left' is used strictly as a form of categorisation, rather than a positive normative evaluation. Some of the instances of left politics described in this article are, for instance, vulnerable to charges of

being disconnected from wider sites of struggle, and of being insufficiently robust in their criticisms of the wider neoliberal capitalist terrain they inhabit. Therefore, 'left' is not used here as a normative endorsement: it is strictly analytical. The value in using 'left' in this more expansive way, however, is that it helps us to map the complexities and gradations of a conjuncture marked by fuzzy boundaries between neoliberal and anti-neoliberal politics.

Against this backdrop, the exploration of left politics and influencer culture which follows is primarily intended to be a broad-brush theoretical/conceptual mapping exercise. However, the analysis is also underpinned by empirical insights gleaned from several years of immersion in the Corbyn and post-Corbyn left, both in person and online, and as both an academic researcher and private citizen. As well as conducting interview and participant observation-based research on the UK left during the Corbyn years (see Dean 2023a; Maiguashca & Dean 2018), I have, for a number of years, been an active participant in the Corbyn-led Labour Party and post-Corbyn left, offline and (especially) online. In that sense, the analysis presented is in line with so-called 'insider research'. As such, I make no pretence to any kind of dispassionate objectivity and I am – by no my own admission – complicit with and subject to several of the more troubling dynamics of online left discourse I identify in the sections that follow. However, my immersion in left spaces over a period of years, has yielded a familiarity with the intricacies of the ideological and discursive landscape of the UK left, both offline and online.

Furthermore, the mapping of this potentially confusing landscape necessitates a certain scepticism towards traditional disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, within political science – as well as within mainstream political journalism – the formal/institutional politics of the rise (and subsequent fall) of the British left during the Corbyn years have now been well documented (see, e.g. Jones 2020; Maiguashca & Dean 2020; Roe-Crines 2021; Seyd 2020). Less attention, however, has been paid to the proliferation of new forms of left-wing mediatised and cultural practices, largely spearheaded by members of 'Generation Left' during and after the Corbyn years. As such, the article's disciplinary focus – while originating from political/sociological questions concerning the changing shape of left politics in the Corbyn and post-Corbyn eras – ranges beyond political science and political sociology. In particular, I engage extensively with work within cultural studies (particularly the tradition associated with Stuart Hall), and media and communications. The latter discipline has bequeathed an extensive array of insights into the political, economic and cultural logics specific to digital capitalism, while the former insists on the importance of mapping the intersections of the cultural, the economic and the political to capture the specificity of particular historical conjunctures (Gilbert 2019).

More concretely, the key insight to emerge from cultural studies and media and communications that this article responds to concerns the gradual but palpable encroachment of the logics and practices of celebrity culture into everyday politics. The so-called 'demotic turn' in celebrity culture (Turner 2010), aided by the increasing use of popular social media platforms, means that celebrity is no longer remote and exceptional: rather, it is embedded in the everyday norms and habits of late capitalist, neoliberal societies (Driessens 2013). This is reflected in the recent growth of research on 'micro-celebrity' within cultural studies and adjacent fields. Micro-celebrity was famously defined by

Theresa Senft (2008: 25) in her ethnography of 'camgirls' in the following way: 'a new style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs and social networking sites to "amp up" their popularity among readers, viewers, and those to whom they are linked online'. Crucially, micro-celebrity, so defined, requires a 'routinised and normalised' presentation of self (Johnston 2020: 508), premised upon (perceived) authenticity, constructed intimacy and everydayness (Usher 2020).

Although micro-celebrity is a generic cultural process, it is perhaps most commonly associated with social media influencers. The latter, according to Abidin (2018: 71), are 'vocational, sustained and highly-branded social media stars'. The figure of the social media influencer, so defined, is a specific *type* of micro-celebrity, as well as being perhaps its best-known cultural manifestation. The archetypal social media influencer uses online platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, TikTok and YouTube to produce content relating to issues such as health, lifestyle, fashion, and sex and relationships. Crucially, unlike many other micro-celebrities, social media influencers monetise their online profile and personal brand through sponsorship, advertising, subscriptions and so on. And although full-blown professional influencers are a relatively small part of the social media landscape, influencer culture is more pervasive. By 'influencer culture', I mean a pervasive set of cultural norms and expectations that emphasise self-promotion and self-branding through the promise of (potential) accrual of cultural and/or economic capital. Influencer culture helps sustain a highly competitive and individualised digital public sphere, in which influencers seek to build their audiences – and thus their celebrity status and earning potential – in a context of generalised attention scarcity (Abidin 2016; Khamis et al. 2017; Marwick 2013). Thus, I use 'influencer culture' to refer not just to the specific stylistic and aesthetic norms and habits of social media influencers, but also to the ways in which social media influencers increasingly come to embody/epitomise a more general cultural condition centred upon the pursuit of (potentially monetisable) social media visibility.

Digital politics and (anti-)neoliberalism

This brief overview of influencer culture does, however, beg a set of broader questions about the nature, scope and character of digital politics, including its relationship with neoliberalism. This section sets out the wider theoretical context to debates about digital politics, and contextualises my specific analysis of neoliberalism, influencer culture and UK left politics therein.

Put briefly, there has, not surprisingly, been a substantial proliferation of analyses of digital politics in recent years. These vary both in the scope and level of analysis, and in the theoretical frameworks used. Within this field, Marxist perspectives have proven particularly valuable and influential, contributing significantly to Marxism's recent partial rejuvenation within the humanities and social sciences. Marxist perspectives – of which the most rigorous is arguably Christian Fuchs' (2018, 2020) development of a Marxist humanist account of digital labour – emphasise the modalities of capital accumulation that underpin the use of digital communication, stressing, for instance, the ways in which digital labour produces surplus value, and the connections between digital capitalism and adjacent modes of oppression such as racism, slavery and patriarchy.

Recent years have also seen the emergence of a range of analyses of digital capitalism which, while less explicitly situated within the Marxist tradition than Fuchs, nonetheless engage with a range of broadly Marxist-inspired questions. These include: the forms of waged and unwaged labour and exploitation that characterise contemporary digital capitalism (Jarrett 2016), the patterns of monopolistic ownership that underpin platform-based digital capitalism (Srnicek 2017), the changing shape of everyday life under digital capitalism (Greenfield 2017), the relationship between the cultural superstructure and economic base of digital capitalism (Törnberg & Uitermark 2022) and the impact of the digital on class composition, solidarity and possibilities for anti-capitalist resistance (Jordan 2015).

However, while not disputing that Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches have bequeathed a hugely valuable array of insights, the approach pursued in this article diverges somewhat from Marxist perspectives on digital capitalism. To some extent, this is simply a question of the level and scope of the analysis: the article is not primarily focussed on questions of systemic exploitation and ownership structures that tend to animate Marxist analyses. Rather, it maps practices of identity formation and the 'rhetorics' of argumentation that characterise left-wing influencer culture. Such questions have tended to be addressed more directly by approaches that draw primarily on perspectives and approaches that draw inspiration from either Gramsci or Foucault rather than Marx (see, e.g. Davies 2021; Finlayson 2022; Gerbaudo 2018, 2022). Indeed, the most extensive analyses thus far produced of the politics of influencer culture have been those provided by scholars such as Alan Finlayson (2021, 2022) and Rebecca Lewis (2018, 2020). Working within a broadly post-Marxist/Gramscian terrain, these authors have produced extensive analyses of right-wing influencer culture, mapping in detail the various actors and ideological clusters that constitute what Lewis (2018) calls the 'alternative influencer network'. According to Lewis, as well as Finlayson (2021, 2022), (far) right-wing influencers should be seen as 'ideological entrepreneurs' working to elucidate and disseminate reactionary political sensibilities, typically via a mode of political discourse premised upon the revelation of truths (which, they argue, the mainstream media nefariously seeks to obscure). Furthermore, Finlayson (2022) suggests that the diverse ideological strands that characterise the online Anglo-American far right are united in a shared opposition to a 'new class' of left-wing 'organic intellectuals' (to use Gramscian terminology), embodied in the figures/tropes of the 'social justice warrior' or 'cultural Marxist'.[1]

The analysis offered here seeks to build on Lewis and Finlayson's analyses of right-wing influencer culture, but shifting attention to the (hitherto understudied) terrain of left-wing digital politics. In so doing, the spirit of the analyses offered here aligns closely with Stuart Hall's (2016) neo-Gramscian account of the processes through which struggles for hegemony play out in and through the terrain of popular culture. More specifically, my aim is to map the specific dynamics of 'containment and resistance' – to use Hall's (1998 [1981]: 443) famous phrase – that shape the intersections of left politics and influencer culture in the current conjuncture.

While the broad conceptual starting point aligns with Gramsci and Stuart Hall, Foucault is drafted in to help theorise the specificity of neoliberalism. For, as Khamis et al. (2017) suggest, the figure of the social media influencer is, in many respects, simply a condensation of the logics of self-promotion and brand optimisation that shape wider

neoliberal culture. Foucault's influential account of neoliberalism stresses, contra Marxist perspectives (such as Harvey 2005), that neoliberalism should be seen not strictly as an economic logic (i.e. concerned with forms of production, distribution and exchange). Rather, neoliberalism is a pervasive *governing rationality* concerned with the remaking of human conduct and subjectivity. As Foucault (2008) puts it in his famous 1979 lectures on the subject, entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics*:

> what is involved is the generalisation of forms of 'enterprise' by diffusing and multiplying them as much as possible, enterprises which must not be focussed on the form of big national or international enterprises or the type of big enterprises of a state. I think this multiplication of the 'enterprise' form within the social body is what is at stake in neo-liberal policy. It is a matter of making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society. (p. 148)

According to Foucault, the making of enterprise as the 'formative power of society' has two further implications. First, it seeks to mould human subjects in the shape of *homo oeconomicus* – 'an entrepreneur of himself' as Foucault (2008: 226) puts it – in which the ongoing search for the optimisation of one's human capital becomes a central, constitutive condition of everyday life. This means, second, that neoliberal rationality extends logics of competition and marketisation into almost all domains of human life, even those not primarily concerned with monetary transactions: it 'involves generalising [the economic form of the market] throughout the social body, and including the whole of the social system not usually conducted through or sanctioned by monetary exchanges' (Foucault 2008: 243). The advantages of a Foucaultian approach to neoliberalism are threefold. First, it emphasises how online discourses and practices – while occurring in a broadly digital capitalist terrain – need not necessarily be directly or unambiguously reducible to capitalist imperatives. Second, it stresses the ways in which neoliberal rationality is sustained in everyday micro-practices, both online and offline. And third, the Foucaultian emphasis on the *entanglement* of power and resistance is extremely useful for making sense of the fraught and contested intersections of left politics and influencer activism. Although a sustained account of the relationship between Marxist and Foucaultian approaches to digital capitalism and neoliberalism is beyond the scope of this article, my approach taken here broadly aligns with Choat's (2019) suggestion that approaches to neoliberalism inspired by Marx and Foucault need not be mutually exclusive but can, if handled carefully, complement one another by directing analytical attention to different dimensions of neoliberal culture, economics and politics.

But how, in light of the above discussion, should we conceptualise the relationship between left politics and neoliberalism, and what does the rise of influencer culture mean for how we understand this relationship? Much existing research on the cultural politics of neoliberalism suggests that certain forms of left, feminist and anti-racist politics do not stand unambiguously in opposition to neoliberalism, but in fact serve to consolidate its dominance. This argument has taken different forms. At one level, there is a strand of thinking, which emphasises the ways in which capitalism has, in various ways, successfully endorsed, co-opted and neutralised various left, radical and progressive sensibilities. Consider, for instance, Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) account of how the ethos of

sixties radicalism was gradually absorbed by capitalist firms, generating a 'new spirit of capitalism' marked by networked and dispersed – rather than traditional, hierarchical – relationships between bosses and workers. Elsewhere, Paul Gilroy (2013) has powerfully documented how principles of empowerment and self-determination drawn from traditions of black radicalism have come to underpin what he calls a 'black vernacular neoliberalism', such that, anti-racist sensibilities have, in some instances, come to actively promote and consolidate neoliberal values. Furthermore, there has been a wave of recent work charting the ways in which commercial culture has, perhaps cynically, sought to assume a sheen of progressiveness through endorsing feminist, anti-racist or pro-LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) sentiment in marketing and advertising, a phenomenon dubbed 'woke capitalism' by Kanai and Gill (2020) and 'elite capture' by Táíwò (2022). Finally, Mark Fisher's (in)famous essay 'Exiting the Vampire's Castle' pursues a similar line of inquiry, albeit more polemically. Fisher suggests that 'Left Twitter' has become characteristed by a culture of competition and oneupmanship, in which self-promotion takes precedence over solidarity and collective struggle (Fisher, 2013).

A variation on a similar argument can be found in feminist scholarship, charting how explicitly feminist discourse has been rendered compatible with neoliberal imperatives. For example, Catherine Rottenberg (2018) has documented the rise of a specifically neoliberal modality of feminism – epitomised by the 'lean-in' ethos of former Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg – which seeks to empower ambitious women in the workplace, but at the expense of a collective struggle against patriarchal relations of domination. Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2018) influential work on 'popular feminism' casts the latter, in part, as a story of the displacement and marginalisation of more radical politics by forms of feminist culture that accommodate, rather than challenge, the neoliberal status quo. She identifies a fundamental 'difference between a popular feminism that circulates within a [neoliberal] economy of visibility, and those other feminisms, such as intersectional feminism or queer feminism, that don't have a clear pathway or visible narrative within this economy' (Banet-Weiser 2018: 105). Furthermore, political theorist Nancy Fraser has put it even more polemically, casting feminism as the 'handmaiden' of neoliberal capitalism through its valorisation of women's participation in the capitalist labour market, all of which comes at the expense of a more explicitly left-wing, socialist and class-conscious conception of feminism (Fraser 2009).

These accounts typify a familiar story about the trajectory of left politics in a neoliberal age. While different, they follow a similar narrative arc: certain strands of left, feminist and anti-racist politics, they argue, have been blunted, weakened or co-opted by neoliberal logics. But, they suggest, this co-optation can be resisted by nurturing and cultivating more explicitly anti-neoliberal and/or anti-capitalist forms of left, feminist and anti-racist politics. In so doing, they all posit a distinction between a 'bad', co-opted vision of neoliberalised left/feminist/anti-racist discourse, and a 'good', authentic left politics that holds out the promise of leading us beyond the current neoliberal impasse.[2] However, Foucault's analysis of the ubiquity of neoliberal rationalities, alongside the mainstreaming of influencer culture within wider political and cultural life serve, I argue, to cast doubt on the viability of these rather rigid distinctions between neoliberal and anti-neoliberal politics. To make good on this claim, however, requires a more sustained consideration of the connections between left politics and influencer culture.

Left politics and influencer culture: mapping the intersections

Put very schematically, there are four main ways in which left/progressive politics and micro-celebrity/influencer culture intersect. The first concerns the ways in which mainstream influencers – that is, influencers whose online content speaks to standard influencer fare relating to lifestyle, health, fashion and so on – sometimes adopt political stances in passing in order to enhance their brand, or to project a certain kind of self-image to audiences, but without this turning into a sustained engagement with political issues. For example, Lucy Moon – a well-known British lifestyle influencer – made a series of videos in 2020 exhorting her audience to reflect on issues of racism and white privilege, during a time when discussions of racism were very much 'on trend' within wider influencer culture, in the aftermath of the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. But Moon is simply one example among many: rhetorical support for a relatively 'safe' iteration of feminist, anti-racist and queer politics is a standard feature of mainstream influencer culture as a whole (Brown 2022). Indeed, the 2022 feature film *Not Okay*, directed by Quinn Shephard, is a black comedy in which much of the humour and satire hinges upon the superficiality of the embrace of progressive ideals within the influencer industry.

A second key point of intersection between left/progressive politics and influencer culture concerns high-profile influencers cultivating an entire personal brand centred around the adoption of left/progressive political stances. Rather than adopting progressive political stances in passing, these people might be better described as 'influencer activists', given the centrality of politics and activism to the content they produce. In the United States, there now exists a sizable community of anarchist, anti-capitalist, Marxist, anti-racist and feminist content creators and YouTubers, an online subculture known colloquially as 'BreadTube' (see Yallop 2021).[3] Similarly, Rachel Wood (2021) has documented the rise of what she calls 'culture jamming' videos on YouTube: such content 'plays' the platform's algorithm by using the discursive styles and aesthetics of mainstream influencer culture, but subverts these with anti-consumerist messages imploring viewers *not* to buy the latest voguish beauty products.

Similar phenomena can be found in the UK context, in which there are two influencer activists who have become particularly well known. The first is Florence Given, a 24-year-old white woman who has, over a period of years, developed a well-known brand promoting feminist ideals relating to sex, relationships, mental health and body image, primarily through Instagram. Given's profile as an exemplar of new forms of 'popular feminism' – to use Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2018) terminology – has led to her authoring two books: *Women Don't Owe You Pretty* (2020), an accessible primer to 'intersectional feminism' and *Girl Crush* (2022), a novel offering a 'dark feminist' retelling of the Jekyll and Hyde story. The latter topped the *Sunday Times* bestseller list, despite receiving overwhelmingly negative reviews. The other is 27-year-old British-Nigerian Chidera Eggerue, a 'bona fide mega-influencer' (Brown 2022: 200), writer and activist who uses the pen name 'The Slumflower'. Eggerue uses a range of social media platforms to promote bold feminist and anti-racist sentiment, mixed with messages of individual empowerment and self-help, including encouraging her followers to be unapologetic in their pursuit of

wealth. Like Given, Eggerue has published two books: *What a Time to be Alone: The Slumflower's Guide to Why You Are Already Enough* (2018), which encourages self-belief and self-sufficiency among her female readers and *How to Get Over a Boy* (2020), which offers advice on dating and relationships. A further twist arose in 2020 when Eggerue – who had previously been close to Florence Given personally and professionally – publicly accused Given of plagiarising her writing, suggesting Given had profited from black women's labour (see Brown 2022; Wray 2020). However, the plagiarism controversy blew over relatively quickly, and both women remain high-profile writers and influencers: I explore responses to this controversy in greater detail shortly.

A third important point of convergence between left politics and influencer culture concerns the rise of what we might call left-wing quasi-influencers. These are different from the likes of Given and Eggerue in several important ways: Given and Eggerue adopt the aesthetic trappings of mainstream influencer culture, and are firmly situated within that milieu. By contrast, the rise of 'generation left' – in Milburn's (2019) terminology – has coincided with the increasing prominence of several left-wing activists and commentators who are not influencers in a traditional sense, but nonetheless adopt many of the same forms of socially-mediated marketing and self-promotion associated with influencer culture. The left-wing lawyer Peter Stefanovic, for example, has become a very familiar face on social media thanks to his straight-talking videos promoting left-wing positions, which frequently achieve high levels of virality across a range of platforms. Although his simple visual style – in which the logo of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) features prominently – is very far from the carefully crafted visual aesthetics characteristic of mainstream influencer culture, he is nonetheless a micro-celebrity of sorts insofar as he has been successful in cultivating an audience for his content and is adept at generating virality and attention. A further example is left-wing journalist and activist Owen Jones: Jones is probably the most high-profile left-wing voice within mainstream British media, and regularly produces content across a range of social media channels – as well as podcasts and a series of book publications – commentating on contemporary politics and society from a socialist perspective. However, Jones exists alongside an array of alternative left media outlets that leapt to prominence during the Corbyn years, the most famous of which is Novara Media. Several people associated with Novara Media – most notably, Ash Sarkar and Aaron Bastani – have become left-wing micro-celebrities, drawing large social media followings and also featuring prominently in mainstream media (Dean 2023a).[4]

The fourth and final point of connection between left politics and micro-celebrity/influencer culture is to do with how ordinary left-wing citizens relate to the first three elements described above. The prominence that left-wing micro-celebrities enjoy within left spaces more broadly means that many ordinary left-wing citizens inhabit left discourse through reacting to, and engaging with, content produced by left-wing micro-celebrities. As such, much online left discourse takes the form of sharing, engaging with and developing parasocial relationships with, left-wing micro-celebrities. What is more, and as I explain in greater detail in later sections, many left-wing citizens who fall well short of being micro-celebrities in any meaningful sense, nonetheless engage in similar online practices including, but not limited to, the cultivation of a distinctive online brand through the adoption of specific linguistic, aesthetic or ideological elements and

the production of particularly humorous, cutting or 'spicy' takes with the capacity to invite attention and virality. Taken together, these four developments suggest a substantial convergence between influencer culture and contemporary left/progressive politics in the United Kingdom.

Influencer activism and its critics

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this convergence has not been universally welcomed. In this section, I trace the rhetorical and ideological shape of these recent critiques of the encroachment of influencer culture into left politics, before going on to situate influencer culture *and* its critics within a wider conjunctural – that is, neoliberal – context.

Recent years have seen the publication of a number of articles penned by left-wing commentators and journalists bemoaning the ways in which influencer activism serves to dilute or sanitise the potency of left, feminist and anti-racist politics. In a sweeping critique of 'influencer activism' in *The Guardian*, Rachel Connolly (2022) identifies a 'corporate brochure style progressivism' within influencer culture. She contends that the typical influencer is 'a squeaky clean type with brand friendly progressive views, who lists their privileges and performs plainly superficial gestures'. As such, 'what counts as activism on social media is inherently low effort and low cost' (Connolly 2022, n.p.).

Also writing in *The Guardian*, Anglo-Irish black feminist writer Emma Dabiri (2022) took aim at the 2022 iteration of the Oscars 'Gold Party', an annual event hosted by Jay-Z, which took place at the Chateau Marmont Hotel, LA. Despite many of the attendees – including Janelle Monae, Emily Ratajkowski, and, of course, Beyoncé and Jay-Z themselves – having traded on their supposedly progressive and/or anti-racist credentials. Dabiri drew attention to the fact that an ongoing labour dispute at the hotel meant that Beyoncé and friends had to cross a picket line to attend the party. This, argued Dabiri, was symptomatic of the evisceration of any awareness of class-based inequality among progressive celebrity activists. She went on to argue that this self-aggrandising in the name of left/progressive politics was not restricted to mainstream celebrities such as Beyoncé and Jay-Z, but could also be found within influencer activism. The latter, she argued, 'purport to represent their online communities, but it is the individuals themselves who are the primary beneficiaries rather than their followers' (Dabiri 2022, n.p.).

The controversy in 2020 arising from Chidera Eggerue's accusations of plagiarism against Florence Given gave rise to several think pieces concerning the politics and culture of influencer activism. Writing for black feminist website *Gal Dem*, journalist Moya Lothian McLean – a prolific and insightful commentator on politics and digital culture – suggested that while Eggerue was 'not wrong' in her grievances about Given's alleged plagiarism, this overlooked the fact that influencer culture *as such* is predicated upon a kind of soft plagiarism, in which ideas from elsewhere are recycled and repackaged by influencers to advance their personal brand. She writes,

> to be a 'feminist' influencer in 2020 means hawking ideas that have almost certainly been taken from academics and activists – usually older women of colour – and then regurgitating them via an aesthetically pleasing Instagram tile . . . to be mainstream, it has to be accessible and non-radical and it has usually been diluted from elsewhere. (Lothian McLean 2020a, n.p.)

Rather than take sides in the Given vs Eggerue 'beef', Lothian McLean suggests drawing back to consider the wider digitally mediated commercial forces that shape influencer culture. She casts the Given/Eggerue controversy as a symptom of the fundamental commercial interests that govern both publishing and influencer culture/activism. More interesting and more concerning than the substantive content of their respective books – which Lothian McLean deems lightweight and superficial – are the ways in which ostensibly feminist voices are monetised by individual influencers and their publishing houses. In her words,

> it's unlikely the publishing industry is going to stop looking for the next new feminist voice that will keep Gen Z fans buying print books. Management agencies aren't going to be relinquishing their cash cows anytime soon either. But at least we as consumers can think a little more critically about the conveyor belt that leads from our Explore pages to our shelves – and who we should really blame for the likes of Florence Given. (Lothian McLean 2020a, n.p.)

Developing similar themes to Lothian McLean, Ash Sarkar, in an article for the Novara Media website, again stresses similarities between Eggerue and Given. These similarities operate at two levels. First, Sarkar highlights how the *content* of their writing stresses an individualistic approach to feminist and anti-racist politics:

> The personal isn't just political, it's all there is. Eggerue and Given (both peddling books which really should have been tweets) push soft politics for the newly therapised: a glimmering of social consciousness embedded within a cult of the individual. (Sarkar 2021, n.p.)

This was typified, Sarkar argued, by Eggerue's demand that she receive 'reparations' as compensation for Given's alleged plagiarism. Eggerue's call for 'reparations', Sarkar argued, serves to individualise what is essentially a collective struggle for the structural redress of the economic harms inflicted by the legacies of slavery and colonialism. As such, the *form* that influencer activism assumes prioritises competition between individuals for monetisable status, views, likes and so on in the context of attention scarcity, all of which works against the forging of connections necessary for collective struggle. In Sarkar's words,

> the cult of the self engulfs the shared terrain of collective struggle – which, even before the plagiarism row erupted, was Eggerue and Given's direction of travel anyway. The personal makes up the sum total of the political: there's no such thing as social struggle. The influencers have invented intersectional Thatcherism. (Sarkar 2021, n.p.)

Indeed, a disquiet about the use of 'intersectionality' – a term initially coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to conceptualise black women's experiences in relation to anti-discrimination law – has become a recurrent theme in recent left critiques of influencer activism. Jason Okundaye, for example, penned a searing critique of queer influencer activism for the website *Gawker*, in which he took issue with the shallowness and narcissism of queer influencer activists, including, but not limited to, 'the proliferation of an ill-defined and silly version of intersectionality discourse' (Okundaye 2022, n.p.; see also Kanai 2021).

Finally, in a thorough and engaging journalistic analysis of influencer culture entitled *Get Rich or Lie Trying*, Symeon Brown pulls no punches in his analysis of the cynicism and insincerity of influencer activism. Referring in part to the Eggerue/Given controversy, as well as to the efforts by various influencer activists in the United States to monetise their associations with Black Lives Matter, Brown (2022: 188) argues that 'influencers masquerading as activists have hijacked progressive social movements, distorted their truths for their own financial gain and even engaged in outright fabrication'. He further suggests that the incentivising of dishonesty – or even outright lying – as a way of boosting one's appeal online has negatively infected online culture and politics as a whole: 'it feels like the rewards of bad faith have changed twitter's culture and helped dishonesty to thrive among activists, politicians and even journalists desperate for clout' (Brown 2022: 222).

These recent interventions highlighting the political shortcomings of influencer activism have not emerged in a vacuum. Indeed, it is useful to contextualise these arguments within broader tendencies emerging within the British left over the past few years. Simply put, recent critiques of influencer activism are a reflection of a wider disaffection with 'identity politics' or, rather, individualistic and reductive formulations of identity politics. This disaffection has seen a range of leftist, feminist and anti-racist journalists and commentators calling for a re-engagement with questions of solidarity and collectivity, sometimes – but not always – via a foregrounding of capitalism, class and labour relations. Emma Dabiri, for instance, argues that influencer activism deploys a 'framework that largely ignores economic inequality, or the potential for strategic, organised struggle'. As such, Dabiri (2022, n.p.) welcomes a recent 'return to grassroots labour organisation that has started to reap results'.

Similarly, alongside her critiques of influencer activism, Moya Lothian McLean (2020b) has criticised not only influencer activism, but an entire model of politics premised upon the sustaining of what she calls 'the outrage industrial complex'. Feminist and anti-racist politics, she argues, have become sucked into an online political culture centred upon the expression of outrage, in which 'calling out' outrageous or problematic utterances forms the sum total of progressive political struggle. In her words:

> of course, there are some – although it pains me to say it – who sit ostensibly on the 'good' side of the woke divide who have become trapped in a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship by calling out these professional bigots. Sometimes, these callouts are needed. Other times, you have to wonder who is really being served by the act of amplifying harmful comments. (Lothian McLean 2020b, n.p.)

Lothian McLean's argument typifies a widespread sentiment on left Twitter.[5] Over the course of a few months in 2022, there were three particularly prominent left Twitter 'shitstorms': one in response to the claim that Anne Frank had 'white privilege', another in response to a thread asserting that Frida Kahlo was guilty of cultural appropriation through her embrace of her Mestiza heritage, and the third following the revelation that a prominent online American leftist named Ana Mardoll was in fact an employee of arms company Lockheed Martin, despite his radical leftist political commitments (for a breakdown of the latter, see Centennial Beauty 2022). These incidents have merely provided

grist to the mill of those who have become disaffected with (what they perceive to be) the dominance of an individualistic and identitarian rendering of left politics in recent years, in which individual self-promotion is prioritised over collective struggle and solidarity, a disaffection is also reflected in recent scholarly work. Works such as *Mistaken Identity* by Asad Haider (2018) and *Elite Capture* by Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò (2022) both, albeit in different ways, offer analysis and critique of what, in their view, is a problematic sidelining of class consciousness within Black Lives Matter-era anti-racist politics, coupled with a tendency to, as Táíwò (2022: 8) puts it, 'close ranks – especially on social media – around ever-narrower conceptions of group interests'. Similarly, the aforementioned Emma Dabiri recently published a book with the provocative title of *What White People Can do Next* (Dabiri 2021). Subtitled 'from allyship to coalition', it calls for a move away from shallow, individualistic conceptions of 'allyship' towards a re-engagement with class, capitalism, labour struggles and the forging of coalitional solidarity. Similar arguments can also be found on the academic left in work by the likes of Jodi Dean (2019) and Lukas Slothuus (2022), both of whom have argued for the political value of 'comradeship' – as collective struggle and solidarity – as distinct from a notion of 'allyship' rooted in individualism and self-aggrandisement.

Influencer activism in and against neoliberalism

Having mapped the broad contours of current debates on the post-Corbyn British left about influencer culture, and the dynamics of individualism and self-promotion it entails, this section zooms out a little to examine the wider context in which claims about influencer activism circulate. In so doing, it offers a critical reading of the debate outlined above. Although, given my own political commitments, I am sympathetic to the arguments offered by Dabiri, Sarkar and others, to fully understand the significance of influencer activism and the criticisms levelled at it, we need to consider the wider conjunctural context. Drawing on an account of neoliberal digital culture inspired primarily by Foucault (2008), I suggest, in this section, that the individualising and self-promoting logics characteristic of influencer activism may in fact be constitutive of online political culture more broadly, and I explore what this means for contemporary left politics.

Recall that, for Foucault (2008), neoliberalism is a governing rationality which has, in his view, become the 'formative power of society', embedding logics of self-promotion and brand optimisation into a whole swathe of human practices, including those not obviously or directly concerned with the economic sphere. Digital culture merely compounds these tendencies, with its incitement to maximise human capital via the production of content that is likeable, shareable and (potentially) monetisable (Törnberg & Uitermark 2022). Although only a small percentage of social media users earn money directly from their online activity, the principles of self-promotion and human capital optimisation nonetheless constitute the landscape of online culture more generally in an age of digital capitalism.

This argument is pursued further by Will Davies in a recent article for *New Left Review.* Davies notes that in an age of social media, 'reputation' has come to displace recognition as the dominant principle of public debate under neoliberal capitalism. The centrality of reputation has engendered a pervasive sense of volatility and anxiety within

public debate. 'In the attention economy of social media', writes Davies (2021: 86), 'public actors may long for recognition, but have to settle instead for varying quantities of 'reputation' or simply the 'reaction' of immediate feedback'. He further goes on to suggest that 'on a cultural and psychological level, this has the effect of making all users of platforms conscious of what impression they are making, and how this might benefit them in future' (Davies 2021: 94). The picture Davies paints is, in many respects, a gloomy one: citizens engage online anxiously second-guessing how their various 'takes' and interventions may be seen by others, and producing content not for the intrinsic pleasure of doing so, but to seek to boost their 'reputation'. In his words: 'if reputation is a form of capital that accumulates over time, then reaction is the currency of investment. Liking, buying, sharing, following and, above all, attending are the ways in which a reputation accumulates positively' (Davies 2021: 94). However, as Davies acknowledges, this is an inherently risky undertaking: a single poorly worded tweet, for instance, can result in a sudden and often irreversible fall in one's reputation in the online marketplace. This in turn means that citizens are compelled to critically scrutinise their own online self-presentation in a bid to maximise their reputation, while also seeking to minimise the chances of reputational damage: what Elias and Gill (2018) have called 'the digital self-monitoring cultures of neoliberalism' are thus endemic features of the online public sphere under neoliberal capitalism.

This, in turn, has troubling implications for those committed to left politics. If Davies (2021) is correct to suggest that the competitive vying for status and reputation is part of the wider cultural logic of neoliberal digital capitalism, then left politics is also subject to these imperatives. As such, even if one adopts a political position critical of the individualising logics of social media, one is still entangled within, and subject to, the neoliberal rationalities that shape the online public sphere. Left Twitter – as a virtual counterpublic composed of citizens with broadly similar political commitments – is, like the rest of the digital public sphere, a space of individualisation and competition, in which individual leftists seek to enhance their 'reputation'. However, there are a number of distinctive techniques of reputation-enhancement specific to the left-wing twittersphere, outlined in more detail in the following paragraph.

The first consists in evincing erudition, fluency and knowledge about specific histories of left movements, or familiarity with left theorists (e.g. through demonstrating an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Russian Revolution, or evincing a familiarity with obscure passages from Marx and Engels). The second involves putting forward particularly 'spicy' or controversial takes, especially those which will deliberately antagonise opponents, and thus win the approval of fellow leftists. The third is to offer particularly witty or cutting 'take downs' of silly, problematic or contradictory utterances from opponents. A popular genre of tweet in this vein is to juxtapose screenshots of tweets from the same person displaying clearly contradictory political positions, accompanied only by the caption 'this you?' (see Greig 2022, for a critique of this particular approach). The fourth entails demonstrating radicalism or commitment through critique. A particularly common grammar through which this is expressed is by alighting on a specific person, theme, argument, cause or pop cultural phenomenon admired by other leftists, and then explaining why the entity in question is in fact problematic, despite at first appearing positive. Such a move has the effect of projecting both analytical sophistication – in noticing features not apparent to others – and political radicalism, in taking a more explicitly oppositional stance

than other leftists. The fifth is to cast oneself as ideologically sound and/or morally pure, through the projection of complicity/problematic behaviour onto others. Feminist cultural studies scholar Akane Kanai (2020) has documented this logic at some length in her study of young Australian feminists' negotiations of digital culture. She observed a tendency among young feminists to project an image of 'goodness' – and to absolve oneself of complicity – by casting specific celebrity feminists (such as Lena Dunham and Taylor Swift) as embodying 'problematic' tendencies they sought to avoid. The sixth and final modality involves evincing fluency in certain key concepts or terminology, and thus seeking to enhance one's reputation through demonstrating superior epistemic credentials. Again, Akane Kanai's recent work analyses these process, in demonstrating how a fluency in theories of intersectionality was seen by her interviewees as the *sine qua non* of being a 'good' feminist and anti-racist subject (Kanai 2021).

To be clear, in pursuing this line of argument, I seek not to offer a normative or moralising judgement about the ways in which left-wing citizens engage online, not least because I myself have engaged in most, if not all, of the practices noted above at some point. Rather, my aim is to think about how the cultural logic of (neoliberal) digital capitalism shapes left-wing political culture *as a whole*. In this sense, my argument is inspired by Wendy Brown's observations about the ways in which neoliberal rationalities have conditioned almost all aspects of our political culture including, paradoxically, ostensibly anti-neoliberal forms of politics. As she puts it, 'nothing is untouched by a neoliberal mode of reason and valuation and neoliberalism's attack on democracy has everywhere inflected law, political culture, and political subjectivity' (Brown 2019: 8).

This in turn serves to call into question the distinctions that undergird the journalistic critiques of influencer activism outlined above, as well as much of the existing scholarship on the co-optation of feminism/anti-racism/anti-capitalism by neoliberalism. Crucially, the journalistic critiques of influencer activism *and* the scholarly discourses of, for example, Banet-Weiser, Rottenberg and Mark Fisher share a specific logic: they all contrast influencer activism and co-opted/neoliberalised politics – coded as superficial and self-promoting – with a proper, serious left/feminist politics (often, but not always, linked to a more explicitly anti-capitalist position). However, if Brown and Davies are correct in their assessments of neoliberal digital culture, we are confronted with the troubling possibility that opposition to neoliberalism in general – and/or to more egregious forms of individualistic left discourse/influencer activism – can itself become a modality through which to enhance one's reputation by cultivating a distinctive online persona or 'brand', thus becoming recouped by the very neoliberal logics one is ostensibly seeking to resist.[6] Paradoxically, then, even highly trenchant critiques of influencer culture specifically, or the impact of neoliberalism on left politics more broadly, are themselves always already conditioned by the wider neoliberal rationalities they inhabit. Consequently, calls for a re-engagement with, say, questions of class solidarity and collective struggle become simply another modality through which to cultivate status and attention within the wider terrain of neoliberal digital capitalism.

To be clear, in making this point I am not suggesting that specific authors are wrong to make these arguments. My point, rather, is to emphasise that, in an age of digital capitalism, left-wing citizens have become so accustomed to aligning our styles of political discourse with the imperatives of neoliberalism that it has become second nature for many. As Wendy Brown (2018, n.p.) observes,

> consider, for example, how many left intellectuals use their social media profiles – Twitter, Facebook, etc. – not to build the Revolution, but to promote their books, speaking gigs, and ideas in order to boost their market value. This has become so ubiquitous that we hardly notice it.

Although, at first glance, this may come across as a pessimistic argument, it is less controversial than it might at first appear, especially if one adopts a Foucaultian perspective on power and resistance. As Foucault (1978: 95) notes in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, 'resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power'. Or, to put it in language more reminiscent of Judith Butler (1999), the terms of political resistance are, to a certain extent at least, always already conditioned by the very terms of the power relations one is seeking to resist. And yet, the primacy of reputation under neoliberal digital capitalism means that one's entanglement within the terms of power is rarely acknowledged. As both Akane Kanai (2020) and Will Davies (2021) have pointed out (albeit in rather different conceptual grammars), we inhabit a political culture that incentivises the cultivation of an image of purity and perfection, in which to risk impurity or imperfection would be to jeopardise one's value within the online marketplace. Thus, counter to the Foucaultian injunction to acknowledge the complexity and mutual constitution of power and resistance, online digital culture incentivises the *disavowal* of complicity, entanglement or even complexity.

One outcome of this line of argument is that it casts doubt on the possibility of a fundamental qualitative distinction between 'influencer activism', on one hand, and wider left political engagement, on the other, given that neoliberal digital capitalism entails the dissemination of the self-promoting logics of influencer culture into all areas of cultural and political life. Put differently: the influencer activist should be seen as a particularly overt manifestation of wider logics that condition contemporary political culture – including left political culture –rather than something exceptional or qualitatively distinct. What is at stake then, is not so much a critique of influencer activism as a specific phenomenon. Rather, what is required is a consideration of the ways in which the norms, practices and assumptions of influencer culture have permeated into contemporary political life more broadly.

Conclusion: are we all influencers now?

My aim in this article has been to suggest that for those interested in understanding, theoretically and analytically, the changing character of left politics, then influencer culture is something we can ill-afford to ignore. Despite the fact that, at first glance, influencer culture looks and feels very different to the kinds of politics and aesthetics traditionally associated with the left, this article has argued that influencer culture has been an important site of contestation within the contemporary British left. What is more, an understanding of influencer culture is crucial for making sense of the wider shape, character and texture of contemporary left politics in the context of what Keir Milburn calls 'generation left'.

The more specific argument I put forward had three parts to it. First, I suggested that left politics and micro-celebrity/influencer culture intersect in several important ways,

but most clearly in the phenomenon of influencer activism: that is, social media influencers for whom politics and activism are central to their personal brand. Second, I argued that there has been a significant backlash against influencer activism, manifest in a veritable outpouring of think pieces and polemics taking issue with the alleged superficiality and frivolity of influencer activism. Furthermore, these critiques are part of a wider disaffection with (what are perceived to be) reductive and individualistic renderings of identity politics on the British left. Third, I cast doubt on the sustainability of a rigid distinction between influencer activism, on one hand, and radical, solidarity-based left politics, on the other. Drawing on Foucault, I suggested that this is primarily because the ubiquity of neoliberal rationality in our political culture means that even ostensibly anti-neoliberal forms of politics are subject to neoliberal imperatives such as self-promotion and brand optimisation. This means that rather than being an outlier, influencer activism should, rather, be seen as an embodiment, albeit in rather extreme form, of tendencies there are endemic to all forms of political engagement under neoliberal digital capitalism.

Although my argument has been specific to the intersections of influencer culture and left politics in contemporary Britain, there are, I would argue, wider lessons for how we conceptualise micro-celebrity and the figure of the social media influencer. A cursory glance at popular media reveals a litany of denunciations of the supposedly malign impact of social media influencers. The social media influencer has become a byword for all that is vain, indulgent, narcissistic, superficial and frivolous. There are numerous newspaper columns, TV shows and feature films offering cautionary tales of the dangers of influencer culture. One could even go so far as to say that the influencer has become a kind of 'folk devil', to use Stanley Cohen's (1973) terminology, given the frequency with which she is seen as the epitome of a multitude of social ills. In highlighting the prevalence of negative depictions of social media influencers, my aim is not to defend influencer culture: rather, I aim to suggest that influencer culture is a symptom rather than a cause of the various social ills that are attributed to it. Thus, although I do not disagree with the criticisms levelled at influencer activism described earlier in this article, there is a sense in which the influencer activist is an easy target for critique. At the risk of being a little speculative, perhaps the reason that we are often so keen to dismiss the figure of the social media influencer is because they exemplify features that we recognise in ourselves, but do not wish to acknowledge. As Richard Seymour notes in *The Twittering Machine*, his devastating 2019 critique of what he calls the 'social industry', charges of 'narcissism' in the context of social media are ubiquitous, but the charge is always directed elsewhere and never acknowledged in ourselves (Seymour 2019: 94). Consequently, the 'narcissism' is not specific to the social media influencer: it is a generic feature of the cultural logic of digital capitalism.

In light of these arguments, at least two potential avenues for future research emerge. The first is simply the fact that we urgently need more analysis of the intersections of (left) politics and influencer culture in different national and ideological contexts, so as to better understand the significant and perhaps growing convergence between politics and micro-celebrity/influencer culture. The second potential avenue for research would be to examine more closely why and how the figure of the social media influencer has become such a pariah. It would be instructive, perhaps through the use of discourse

analysis and/or psychoanalytic theory, to examine the ways in which influencers are discursively and affectively constructed as harmful and malign, and to examine the cultural and political function of such constructions. For many on the left, influencer culture may provoke rage, bemusement or anxiety, but confronting it head on is a necessary task when seeking to diagnose the specificity of contemporary political culture.

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Notes

1. Indeed, the extent of the reactionary right's preoccupation with these figures is such that one of the best-known 'left-wing' influencers in the United Kingdom is the figure of Titania McGrath, a notoriously unfunny spoof of a left-wing influencer, conjured up by right-wing comedian and 'free speech' campaigner Andrew Doyle.
2. See Eschle and Maiguashca (2018) for an analysis and critique of these narratives.
3. The etymology of the term 'BreadTube' is thought to derive from the title of Peter Kropotkin's 1892 text *The Conquest of Bread*.
4. See also Tufekci (2013) for some thoughtful reflections, in the context of the so-called 'Arab Spring', on how high-profile movement spokespeople assume a kind of micro-celebrity status.
5. I use 'Left Twitter' here to refer to a loose, yet nonetheless palpable community of English-speaking Twitter (Now "X") users who share a set of reference points, styles of expression and left-wing political commitments. 'Left Twitter' users are typically young (i.e. under 40), although not without exception, and adopt a political stance to the left of the Starmer-led British Labour Party, or the Biden presidency in the United States. In this sense, Left Twitter could be seen as a 'counterpublic' analogous in some respects to Black Twitter (for which, see Gutiérrez 2022).
6. For a similar argument relating to expressions of left/progressive sentiment in contemporary popular music, see Dean (2023b).

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