

Bog People: A Working Class Anthology of Folk Horror

Edited by Hollie Starling

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Written in 1847 and published in 1848, *The Communist Manifesto* begins, ‘A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism’ (Marx & Engels 2002, p. 218). Marx and Engels sought to consolidate their political philosophy and to lay to rest the shifting phantom that was seen everywhere in a revolutionary Europe but was lacking material form. In their words, they sought to ‘meet this nursery tale of the Spectre of Communism with a Manifesto of the party itself’ (p. 218). And thus they would shine a light on the politics of the new classes wrought by modern capitalism, would give form to the aims of a politics of the working class. Hollie Starling is clear that *Bog People* is not informed by this understanding of class alone; ‘Defining class may be complicated and often fraught’ (p. 13), she writes in the introduction. The socio-economic definition that predominated as a political identity has now become less clear in its usage. Arguably, over the following one-and-a-half centuries, class as a critique of the divisiveness inherent in capitalist social arrangements became ghostly in the face of what briefly looked like the triumph of globalized and globalizing capitalism. The lurching growth of nationalist populism across the globe betokens a regressive diminution of world systems, a shrinking retreat from – and reaction against – the *socius* that grew with capital’s globalised trades without borders. Here, class re-emerges as a vehicle of division. Phrases like ‘the traditional working class’ are used to exacerbate manufactured tensions between white cultural majorities and their Others. Class returns here as a ghoul, preying on status instability and economic precarity.

So, what would a folk horror retelling of class today look like? In her introduction to *Bog People*, editor Hollie Starling suggests that the collection offers a position from which, ‘Together we will relearn the disruptive potential of stories to upend fortresses of power,’ (Starling 2025, 14). The blurb on the cover promised similarly grandiose claims: BBC stalwart Charlie Cooper calls it, ‘Feral and ferocious’; arguably one of the world’s most renowned comic book writers, Alan Moore, tells us it is ‘[a]stonishing and long overdue, you really need to read this’. With these endorsements and the promise of disruption and the kicking-over of conventions, the book seems to offer a radical, political version of class—but this is not the experience that reading offers.

The aggregate effect of the collected stories is melancholic, defeated, and haunted: by the past, by claustrophobia, by the playing out of a miserable inevitability of internecine conflict, of a long walk into slow death, and by fear. Fear of the Other, of the same, of failure, of exclusion, of inclusion. The stories gathered here chart the boundaries of a melancholia for the dissolution of class as it was; in a wonderfully nuanced reading of the English football chant, “Two world wars and one World Cup,” Paul Gilroy expands on the flattening effect of the phrase, and makes clear its desire to suspend time in the long twentieth century of Empire:

“Those words reveal that there is a sense in which Britain’s brave but confused affiliates prefer an ordered past in which they were exploited and pauperized, but nonetheless knew who they were, to a chronically chaotic present in which even those limited certainties have been stripped away,” (Gilroy 2005, 120)

Within this is an invocation of the spectre that haunts *Bog People*, of class as it was rather than in its emerging forms. It looks back as a map of the melancholia for class as a source of identity and community, but is robbed of its political potential.

The “holy trinity” of folk horror all rest on the eruption of forces that threaten to overturn the social order. In *Witchfinder General* (1968), there is the complicity of the rural populace in the violence of a cynical reimagining of “the true religion”. *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971) saw a sexually lawless cult seduce the young away from their pulpits into an undisciplined arcadia. *The Wicker Man* (1973) depicted, famously, the sacrifice of a WASP police officer to the gods of an (imagined) pagan feudalism. Chaos and disorder lurked beneath the surface, historically and contemporaneously. They did so with gusto and against the conventional morality of the time, embracing wanton destructiveness. If Fredric Jameson demands that when we engage with a text we must ‘Always historicize’ (Jameson 2002, p. ix), then the growth of the counterculture, the Angry Brigade’s bombing campaign, the civil war in Northern Ireland, and the racism reflected by Enoch Powell tell us something of the violence, fears, and utopian dreams that were in foment when the unholy trinity were summoned onto to celluloid. Their horror articulated fears of dangerous collectives that threatened the established social order: the masked, massed folk of Summerisle; Angel Blake’s cult in the woods; and Matthew Hopkins’ obsessive zealotry made possible by communities ready to accuse their “Others”.

The horror of *Bog People* is unclear, uncertain. There is no intimation of any kind of threat of collective collapse; all horror is individuated, psychologized, Thatcherite. Can there be such a thing as socialised folk horror anymore? In *Immediacy* (2024), Anna Kornbluh unpicks an anti-theoretical cultural and political tendency to dismantle complex, abstract collective formations that require us to think beyond our immediate contexts. Instead, we live from one screen click to the next in a world of first-person, lived experience, selfied, psychologised, “real talk”; here, the self becomes its own isolated community. The protagonists in *Bog People* often seem caught between a longed-for but receding authenticity

or community and their inner worlds. Class *as* community is always elsewhere, or continually dissolving.

This is not to say that this collection is a bad read. Far from it; many of the stories are compelling in their accounts of this mode of melancholic class longing. Some are beautifully written. Emma Glass's achingly tender account of loss and the bottomless chasm of mourning is subtle and powerful. A.K. Blakemore's account of the brittle antipathy of an imagined little Englander's retreat into an ossification of the spirit is a thoughtful, affective study in the way the world can become filled with a crisp hatred of all that is unknown. *Bog People* also offers the reader the opportunity to reflect on what class means today. The "we" who speak through it are restricted to the South and Midlands of England; it rarely ventures north of the M62 and does not step beyond England's borders. And here, remembering to '[a]lways historicize,' we can understand this as a post-Brexit retreat into the dead heart of Empire. The pain and the horror of the end of one world can be discerned here; the sundering of the ties that joined a people in the hope of a new world have been undone. Melancholy, violence, and fear predominate, and here, *Bog People's* horror is clear.

Works Cited

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