



## The death of collective identity

### Description

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big tech smothers collective identity

There was, within living memory, an infrastructure of collective thinking in this country – an infrastructure, above all else, for thinking about politics.

## Collective spaces recede

The union branch, the party, the working men’s club, the tenants’ association, the chapel and the co-operative were not simply organisations people joined. These were places where political thought was produced through dialogue and shared experience, translating grievances, whether at home or at work, into collective political action.

That infrastructure has been demolished over the last four decades. Union membership has particularly declined [from its 1979 peak of 13.2 million to around 6.4 million today](#)

Moreover, density in the private sector where most people work, has reduced to barely 12%. Whole mass-membership parties have declined in step.

The story of that destruction, from the Thatcher era to the casualisation of work, has been told numerous times. Yet far less attention has been given to what filled the spaces left behind.

## From the meeting hall to the feed

What replaced the infrastructure of collective thought was an infrastructure of individual expression, and the difference between the two is not a matter of degree.

The branch meeting, whatever its tedium, was a technology to produce a shared position. This happened since the people in the room had to listen, argue, amend and finally vote on something they would jointly act upon.

In contrast, the feed is a technology used for ranking individuals. The platform rewards each user for distinct performances which the algorithm sorts according to provocation.

Political engagement has not disappeared per se. In terms of raw volume, it has probably never been higher. Only its modern manifestation takes on the form of habitual clicking, sharing, posting, and reposting.

Instead, it leads to the accumulation of individual visibility within systems owned by private corporations. They optimise content for advertising revenue, structurally indifferent, in other words, to whether anything held in common ever emerges.

A person may spend hours consuming political content, and may never once participate in the formation of a collective position. After all, the interface through which they engage doesn't facilitate those positions, nor is it designed for that purpose.

## Undermining the collective, **default watermark** increasing attention

This loss is not confined to politics. Human attention itself, if the past two decades are anything to go by, has been captured by big-tech. How we think, how we connect, and what we give our attention to — and how much of it — have been colonised by an industry whose business model is to capture and fragment our attention.

These platforms harvest far more than our data and time. They are monetising and exploiting human curiosity, anxiety, attraction and rage — decomposed into data and sold back as stimulation calibrated to provoke the next reaction. These platforms are awash with messages and posts, but are meaningful conversations taking place amid the tidal wave of information?

The more information flows the less we seem to be learning. Conversations are encouraged but are users actually having conversations online? People are stimulated to the point of exhaustion — so enraptured by the feed that little exists outside of the echo chamber. The demise of collective thinking in this way has not taken away the means to wage political struggle. It has eroded the capacity to think about it at all.

## Democracy without a —demos— or a collective

If [democracy means rule by the people](#) then —the people— is not just a group of individuals. It is a collective that thinks and forms a shared will. Liberal democracy assumes this collective exists, but depends on human connection built in person, not online.

Consider what democracy consists of now. We vote alone, on individual devices, fed by recommendation algorithms that pump out content hourly. We cast our ballots alone, in individual booths. Between elections, political discussion is treated as a taboo — an embarrassment to be

avoided at work, at dinner, or among friends.

The one activity democracy most requires is the one most avoided. Every interface through which we encounter political life, from feed to ballot, addresses us as individuals and returns us to ourselves as individuals. The collective subject is no longer produced anywhere. Democracy without a demos is a body without a head—still moving through its procedures, still counting its ballots, while the capacity that once guided it has been hollowed out.

*Featured image via the Canary*

By [Rares Cocilnau](#)

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