

Relations of Force

Social change is always an expression of what Antonio Gramsci called the 'relations of force' in a given situation. What exactly does this mean?

Every society is made up of a number of different social social groups. Those groups can be defined in various ways. For example, the idea of social 'class' assumes the existence of groups which are defined by their shared economic interests. This might be a question of certain people having similar occupations and living consequently similar lifestyles. It might be a more abstract question of some people having access to certain kinds of resources (land, shares, property, investments) and others not having access to them. As well as class groupings, social groups can be united and divided from each other by various types of cultural affiliation, which might include anything from language to musical preferences, from religious beliefs to sporting loyalties. Other features which might define the existence of such groups include locality, age and gender. In complex modern societies, any given person could potentially belong to any number of such groups simultaneously - so which ones they actually care about belonging to will vary widely from one situation to another. As such, which of these types of group become activated politically - which ones become organised, make demands, influence outcomes - will also vary from one situation to another.

For example historically, the labour movement - and especially the radical, Marxist and internationalist currents of that movement - have tried to persuade working people to think of themselves primarily in class terms, recognising all who work for a living as sharing a strong set of clear interests. In practice this has often proved difficult, as the pull of religious, ethnic or national loyalties has almost always proven stronger, while the cultural differences between different types of worker (for example, between miners and schoolteachers) has often made it all but impossible to

unite them into a coherent movement. In practice people seem just as likely to form themselves into groups based on one of those other sources of identity and loyalty as they do to commit themselves to class groupings.

Hegemony and Historic Blocs

Another thing that will vary is how strong particular groups become, what kind of alliances they are able to make with others, and on what terms. So, for example, in Britain, for most of the first half of the 20th century, members of professional occupation groups overwhelmingly identified with the Conservative Party, largely because they saw themselves as broadly part of the same cultural community as the bourgeois elite which it represented. They may not have attended the ancient public schools, or even Oxbridge, but their experience of school and university, the media they consumed and their cultural habits, would all have been largely modelled on those of that elite, making the world of the unions and the socialist societies seem alien to most of them, except in the great metropolitan centres such as Leeds, London and Manchester. This sense of common identity and shared purpose between the middle classes and the rich was crucial in enabling the bourgeois elite to retain control of the British state for the whole period up until World War II, even while radical movements were making headway in many other parts of the globe.

By the end of the 1970s, and certainly by the 1990s, this situation had changed radically, as the post-war expansion of the welfare state created a situation in which professionals were no longer likely to be self-employed property-owners, and were far more likely to be employed by the NHS, the state education system, publicly-funded universities, and various legal and social support services. The Labour Party increasingly came to represent a kind of alliance between those groups and the industrial trade-unions which had been its traditional base. At the same time, the culture of many of those professional occupation groups had been transformed by the new cultural radicalism

in the 60s and 70s, which was stronger among university graduates than among manual workers. In turn, many of the latter were alienated from a Labour Party that seemed to increasingly represent the culture of those welfare-state professionals more than that of 'traditional' working class communities.

This, along with her policy of effectively giving away council houses, was a key condition for Thatcher managing to win over certain sections of the manual working class in the early 80s, especially in Southern England, even while she was destroying working class communities elsewhere. That support made it possible for her to pursue her war on Northern industrial workers, poor urban communities and public-sector workers, which in turn enabled her government to pursue a programme which ultimately succeeded at re-establishing the banks and the big investment firms of the City as the most powerful institutions in the country. This outcome has effectively shaped every aspect of UK politics ever since. For example, New Labour was pretty much exactly what anyone would expect from a government which had to rely on the support of those same public sector workers whom Thatcher has alienated, but which was unwilling to do anything to challenge the power of the City or its values and assumptions.

These are all just examples of the way that alliances and allegiances between different social groups can shift. But whatever the situation, it is this set of issues - what kind of groups are active politically, which are the strongest, and what kind of alliances they make with other groups - which are the ones which really determine most significant political outcomes in any historical situation. This is essentially what we are referring to when we talk about 'the relations of force' in any given social situation. From this point of view, politics is ultimately always about the balance of forces - about trying to shift it one way or another, by building up your side's forces, making alliances, weakening your enemies and winning some of their allies to your side.

This means that all politics is effectively a politics of coalition. This might sound obvious, but it is remarkable how many people and how many traditions of political thought find it impossible to get to grips with this idea. Arguably the two major forms of politics to emerge in the 19th century, which shape our world to this day, were both based on denying it. What various kinds of nationalism had in common was that they tried to turn the diverse groups and traditions inhabiting particular geographical areas into 'imagined communities', defined by a homogenous culture, language and history. Following a not dissimilar logic, classical Marxism expected the industrial working class - the 'proletariat' - to continue to grow, until it encompassed a clear majority of each population, and it was implicitly assumed that this would lead the culture and politics of such populations also to become increasingly uniform.

By world war one, it was clear that things weren't working out that way. Marx had thought that the peasantry would simply have to disappear from any country in which socialism were to become a real possibility (although by the end of his life he had hopes that the peasant communes of countries like Russia could become the basis for a socialist project). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the theory of revolution developed by Russian communists such as Plekhanov and Lenin explicitly understood the revolutionary forces to be necessarily a coalition of different social groups: the hammer and sickle, which became the logo of international communism, is precisely a symbol of the peasantry acting in concert with the industrial workers. Importantly, the Russian revolutionary theorists always assumed that the proletariat (itself led by the revolutionary party) would have to be the *leading* element of such a coalition, and that leadership role is what would come to be discussed and theorised under the heading of 'hegemony'. In the years following the war and the Russian Revolution, nationalism took on its most hideous form with the rise of fascism, while the pursuit of unity in the USSR led Stalinism into the dark territory of purges, show-trials, executions and slave labour. It was during this period that Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Communist leader imprisoned by Mussolini's regime, developed his understanding of the nature of power in complex modern

societies. For Gramsci, hegemony is not simply something to be sought by revolutionary forces trying to establish themselves as the leaders of a broad social coalition; it is also a form of power which has to be exercised continually by those who hold power in any society at a given moment.

For Gramsci, even those who have the most access to power, resources and privilege in modern societies must effectively lead complex coalitions of different groups in order to maintain their 'hegemonic' positions. To do this, they must use a full range of techniques of leadership, sometimes bullying and intimidating their 'followers', sometimes coercing them outright, often going to great efforts to persuade them to accept the world-view of their 'leaders', often making material concessions of some kind to persuade them to remain 'on side'. In the decades following world war 2, with the industrial working class at the peak of its historic potency, these concessions mainly took the form of ever-increasing wages and an unprecedented expansion of the welfare state which amounted to a genuine redistribution of wealth from the richest to the poorest. Since the 1970s, ruling elites have propagated a belief in individual competition as the fairest and most efficient way to distribute resources in society, while effectuating a huge redistribution of wealth back to the rich from the poor and middle classes through tax-cuts, privatisation and the imposition of rules in public services which try to force them to behave like businesses. This, in a nutshell, is what is known as 'neoliberalism'. In material terms what has been offered to most people as a reward for tolerating this process has been an increase in their private capacity to consume, facilitated by cheap manufacturing in China and by the expansion of personal debt, rather than by any continued increase in real wages.

From a Gramscian perspective, an important point to take on board here is that these different historical phases have seen different social groups able to realise their material interests in particular ways. The post-war period famously saw a kind of alliance formed between unions, governments and manufacturers in many capitalist countries, who all had an interest in maintaining

a particular type of economy based on high levels of state investment and public spending, full employment, high wages, and significant protection of domestic markets. Since the 1980s it is the financial sector which has re-emerged as the element of the UK economy and as the leading element within the capitalist class, and it is those sections of the managerial and professional classes, the media and the full-time political class who have aligned with them most closely who have been best able to reap the rewards of social, cultural and technological change.

In both cases, it is not a matter simply of one entire social class being able to lord it over the other. Rather, we see complex alliances being formed between different parts of different social classes. Let's get the terms clear here. In Marxist terms, industrialists and financiers are all part of the capitalist class, whereas, say, journalists dockers and call-centre operators are all members of the working class. But in the instances that we are referring to here, it's necessary to see that large-scales 'classes' can be divided up into various sub-groups or 'class fractions'. In each of the cases above, we can say that the groupings that have benefited the most from social and economic change in a particular period are particular clusters of class fractions. Gramsci refers to these clusters of class fractions to as 'historic blocs'.

It's worth reflecting further on the fact that what binds together these historic blocs in both cases are not just short-term economic interests (although those are crucial), but also certain sets of cultural norms and desires which provide what we think of as *resonances* between otherwise fairly disparate groups. For example, the industrial capitalists and industrial workers of the post-war period often seemed to share a rather conservative sexual politics and a sober, conformist attitude to life which was partly suited to their conditions of work, partly an inheritance from the protestant tradition, partly a traditional feature of life in several regions of Britain, particularly Scotland, Wales and Northern England. Conversely, financiers have historically always tended towards a more libertarian and hedonistic, somewhat aristocratic, aesthetic, which resonated with the more

hedonistic culture of post-60s consumerism and placed less obstacles in the way of a revolution in sexual mores and expectations about gender roles during the latter decades of the 20th century. This allowed a shared culture of individualism, hedonism and consumerism to emerge as the common currency of the new hegemonic historic bloc which emerged in the 1980s.

From this perspective then, the era we are living in is one clearly shaped by the hegemony of a particular historic bloc. As I have already suggested, this bloc is made up principally of finance capital and those various other social constituencies who are most closely aligned to its values and ways of doing things. I would add to this the suggestion that there is one other section of the capitalist class which has been at least as influential as the financial sector: the digital technology industry, who I think must be understood as a key element of the historic bloc which has implemented the neoliberal programme globally in recent decades. Without their innovations, the globalisation of the economy and the deregulation of financial services, the privatisation of many public services and the incredible expansion of personal credit would all have been impossible. At the same time, nobody has actually affected the way we live in recent times more than Apple, Google, Microsoft and Facebook. Of course, this is a reciprocal relationship - the venture capital which fuels Silicon Valley flows directly from the most innovative financial institutions of Wall Street, The City, Hong Kong and Shanghai. An important point here is that, perhaps for the first time in history, this coalition between class fractions is truly global in scope, although key nodes of its network are obviously located in particular places. In the UK, as we all know, it is the merchant banks and hedge funds of the City which are the most powerful elements to be based here and the ones which exert the greatest influence over our national culture and politics.

Can we Build a Progressive Historic Bloc?

The question which then emerges from all of these observations is: what kind of new historic bloc, what kind of new social, political and cultural coalitions, could actually challenge this neoliberal alliance for long term hegemony in the UK? Arguably it is difficult to imagine such a thing happening on a purely national level, and it is unlikely to occur outside the context of continued international resurgence of the progressive Left. And yet, although we live in the age of globalisation and the world wide web, there is little doubt that for most people in the UK, politics still takes place primarily at a national level.

In that national context there are now two main sources of political opposition to neoliberal hegemony, representing overlapping but distinct social groups. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the social democratic majority in Scotland, now represented by the SNP in the House of Commons. The other is that grouping of class fractions and interests in England and Wales which found its political voice for the first time in a generation with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader. Corbyn's Labour clearly represents primarily what I have called 'the metropolitan Left' of England and Wales, by which I mean not just London liberals, but a broad set of interests including mainly public sector workers (including, but not limited to, affluent professionals) and unionised workers in the private sector, which has its most obvious bases in the large urban centres and university towns. These groups tend to share a commitment to a radical leftist understanding of political issues as well as to a cosmopolitan and socially-liberal outlook. Although more conservative commentators like to claim that anti-racist or anti-homophobic positions are the preserve of the educated classes, there is good evidence that those attitudes are widely shared by those sections of the working class in which unionisation is still prevalent, an outcome of the fact that the labour movement as a whole has been largely won over to feminist and other socially-progressive viewpoints since the 1970s.

The current main problem for Labour is that this bloc alone accounts for only about 25% of the electorate, while Labour's support is weak in the small to medium sized towns where most of the

English and Welsh populations live, where the attitudes of the metropolitan Left are less prevalent, where historically the professional classes have been less radical while the working classes have been less influenced by the culture and politics of the trade-unions. These are the places where unionisation tends to be weak, and where the most significant section of the community tends to be the commercial classes - people running or working for small businesses or operating at lower to middle managerial grades in large corporations. Marxists have traditionally referred to these groups as the “petty bourgeoisie”. Historically they have tended, in most capitalist countries, to be extremely conservative, normally willing to accept the leadership of the capitalist class and generally keen to distance themselves culturally and socially from the working classes or from left-leaning intellectuals and bohemians of any kind. The radical tradition has not tended to be at all interested in the petty bourgeoisie, largely because it was predicted by Marx and many others that as a class they would simply disappear, as more and more wealth and power became concentrated in the hands of the tiny capitalist class and everyone else found themselves working for a wage, as members of the ever-expanding proletariat. In the 1970s there was discussion of a ‘new petty bourgeoisie’, but what was being referred to at the time was largely the growth of salaried professional jobs, mainly in the public sector.

Since the 1970s, however, it’s been increasingly clear that things were developing along quite different lines. In fact this class of people has vastly expanded, even while its traditional social and cultural conservatism has waned. Today I think we can speak about a residual, ‘old petty bourgeoisie’ who are still a significant section of the electorate, who are typically ageing and extremely conservative in their views and preferences, who remain died-in-the-wool Tories, but may be tempted to support UKIP if the Conservative Party no longer seems to express their views. On the other hand I think we can posit the existence of a ‘new petty bourgeoisie’ who tend to be socially liberal, technophile (probably spending a bigger proportion of their income on various kinds of technology than any other group and often working in jobs which depend entirely on the

use of digital technology), hedonistic (not in a party-all-night sense, except when they are very young, but in a gourmet-wine-artisan-food-expensive-holidays sense), and who have no necessarily natural political home among the traditional parties. They have been the natural support base for both the Cameronite wing of the Tory Party and the Blairite wing of Labour. But at the present time, the younger members of this class fraction are the group most likely to be experiencing a precipitous difference between their economic situation and that of their parents, as low wages for young graduates and escalating housing costs push increasing numbers of them into the new 'precariat' of highly-skilled but under-employed workers without security or prospects of achieving any. They could become a key element of a wider progressive coalition if they were motivated by a sufficiently forward-looking and inspiring project for radical modernisation.

At the same time, the more radical elements of both the professional classes and the new petty bourgeoisie are clearly represented both within the Green Party and the Liberal Democrats. In fact they probably make up a majority of the Liberal Democrats and the overwhelming majority of both the Green Party and Plaid Cymru. Arguably all of these parties can be seen as inheritors of the Liberal Party tradition which fragmented and dwindled after the first world war, but which was never completely subsumed into the Labour Party, and which has existed mainly outside of it since the emergence of the SDP-Liberal Alliance in the 1980s. This exemplifies a key strategic issue for Labour in the early 21st century: the historic bloc which it needs to build in order to counter neoliberal hegemony seems very unlikely to be containable by any single party organisation. The situation in Scotland makes this even clearer. Within Scotland itself, a progressive historic bloc of workers, professionals and new petty bourgeois has committed itself to an avowedly social-democratic and anti-neoliberal politics, and has adopted the Scottish National Party as its vehicle, even while it is divided on the issue of actual independence for Scotland. Under these circumstances, it is not clear how Labour could ever hope to intervene in order successfully to break

up that bloc; but without doing so, it is not clear how Labour could ever hope to take back the 40 parliamentary seats that it lost to the SNP in May 2015.

This situation only exacerbates a key underlying problem for Labour. Without those Scottish seats, there is no realistic chance of Labour winning a parliamentary majority ever again. But even with them, there was no reason to believe Labour would have been capable of doing what its leadership claims to want to do: to come from opposition to win a convincing parliamentary majority and go on to implement a progressive programme. Because in fact, Labour has *never achieved this feat even once in its 110-year history*. The first majority Labour government was not elected from opposition: in 1945 a coalition government with a majority of Labour ministers had been governing the country for the previous 5 years of wartime. The next time Labour won an election in 1964, it achieved only a tiny majority, leading Prime Minister Harold Wilson to call an opportunistic election 2 years later at a favourable point in the economic cycle. Labour would not win a convincing parliamentary majority from opposition until 1997. But in 1997, the historic bloc of which Labour was a part included key sections of finance capital. Labour had spent several years previously crafting a message and a programme which was acceptable to the City, reassuring financial interests that they would not tax them or threaten them in any way, even re-branding itself as 'New Labour' in order to convince those interests and their allies in the media that they had nothing to fear from this political project. As such, it is no surprise that the underlying direction of the New Labour government was one which simply entrenched and extended the core economic elements of Thatcher's programme: privatising public services, deregulating markets, facilitating rising inequality and a further weakening of the trade unions.

If we want to avoid a similar fate for any future Labour governments, or to make possible any truly progressive reform at all, then we must think hard about the types of social coalition which Labour will have to try to build and lead in order to achieve its objectives. Of course, even a historic bloc

composed of the metropolitan left and the radical sections of the new petty bourgeoisie would not constitute a clear majority of the British population and electorate. In particular, those sections of the working class located outside the orbit of the metropolitan Left, mainly non-unionised, tending towards cultural conservatism, will, as they always have been, be a key constituency for both progressive and conservative forces to try to win over. It is important here not to succumb to the myth that such people have even been 'natural' Labour supporters - in fact the tradition of working class Toryism, going back at least to the days of Joseph Chamberlain in the 19th century, is older than the Labour Party, and was never completely displaced by it. This is the other social group, along with the old petty bourgeoisie, amongst whom support for UKIP, Brexit and Teresa May is strongest and still growing. But there is good reason to believe that this is mainly because they have been the group least able to benefit from the forms of neoliberal modernisation and cultural liberalisation which have prevailed in recent decades: there's not much to be gained from a world of cosmopolitan culture, cheap holidays, equal gender rights and sexual permissiveness if you are denied access to the jobs and the education which would enable you to enjoy those things. Recent experience both in Scotland and in places like Thanet where progressive forces have worked together to combat UKIP, shows that these groups can be won over to support for a radical programme if they see that they are being offered a clear democratic alternative to neoliberal austerity or to xenophobic conservatism. What has also been clear in all of these circumstances is that this group are even more suspicious than any other of formal politics and politicians: they can be won over to a cause, but not to a party. So far they have not been offered an equivalent cause to Brexit with which they might identify on the Left.

Here it is necessary to understand the decisive role played by the right-wing press in British politics since the 1970s. Hostility to immigration and a certain tendency to social conservatism are the few only attitudes that the post-industrial working class share with the old petty bourgeoisie. On almost all key socio-economic issues they have diametrically opposed views, remaining loyal to the

traditional objectives and principles of industrial social democracy. But with the long-term decline of the labour movement in their communities, they more than ever tend to derive their information and opinions about broad political issues very heavily from news outlets such as the Sun, the Daily Mail and the Express (and, crucially, their massively popular websites). The consistent strategy of this group of media outlets is to mobilise and amplify issues which appear to unite the interests of the post-industrial working class with those of the old petit bourgeoisie, encouraging the idea that immigration or excessive welfare claims are the principle causes for the relative poverty and disenfranchisement of the former, while thereby shoring up the material interests of the latter (who are always the main beneficiaries from reductions in general taxation).

The message for Labour today is a stark one. Any strategy which focusses simply on trying to use the Labour Party alone to bring about progressive change, but ignores the need to build a wider coalition of social forces, is doomed to fail. Given the historic precedents, there is absolutely no reason to imagine that there is any chance of that this new historic bloc can be built by and within the Labour Party alone. Only if Labour finds a way to make its peace with the SNP and to work constructively with those smaller parties who represent the radical wing of the strategically-crucial new petty bourgeoisie, is there any hope at all of building a political coalition which might actually challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism.

At the same time it will be absolutely necessary both to mobilise systematically and explicitly against the tabloid press and to identify positive issues which can unite the interests and concerns of the post-industrial working class with those of the metropolitan left and the new petit bourgeoisie. A twenty-first century industrial strategy, focussed on creating high-value jobs, redistributing existing

work, and using the state to facilitate both entrepreneurship and collaborative forms of research and innovation, would seem to be the obvious central focus for any such agenda.

However, Labour seems currently to be well on the way to generating such an economic programme. It's problem is that as long as its position in the relations of force remains as weak as it currently is, it has almost no chance of actually reaching the post-industrial working class with the level of regularity and intensity required to challenge the persuasive power of the tabloids. There are two things which would be required to achieve this feat.

On the one hand, charismatic leadership which can resonate with the anger and resentment of working class voters outside the big cities would certainly seem to be a *sine qua non* of any progressive developments. Let's be honest about this - Jeremy Corbyn struggles to offer this leadership, not through lack of commitment, but because his personal demeanour and disposition simply do not make him a convincing spokesperson for the angry working class. He does not resonate with angry blue-collar voters in the way that, say, Bernie Sanders does, lacking the rhetorical style to be able to do that. This is not a personal criticism of Corbyn but it is a major problem for Labour, especially considering the complete absence of any better alternative from within the existing Parliamentary Labour Party (various younger MPs are widely touted as likely possible replacements who could channel working class anger as Corbyn cannot, but none of them are ready for this role at the time of writing).

On the other hand, even with the most charismatic leadership imaginable, a party facing the scale and skill of the opposition which Labour faces, refusing to make any real efforts to build positive relationships with other parties and organisations, paralysed as it has been for decades by the hostility of the popular press, is never going to succeed. The press will find some way to distort our message and demonise our leadership, however effective they may be on their own terms. Only an

ambitious broad-based, street level, nationwide campaign against the popular press, exposing its lies on the doorsteps of working class communities, would have any hope of overcoming this paralysis. The point to grasp here, which so few political pundits seem able to understand, is this: simply polishing the leaders's soundbites, generating intelligent good policies is not going to affect Labour's position in the overall relations of force. Only by building up our own forces and challenging those of our opponents can we hope actually to 'get our message across'. At the same time, only a serious attempt to build a coalition is going to create the coalition which Labour would need to achieve a hegemonic position. Whining about why we hate the SNP and the Liberal Democrats - which seems to be the standard reaction of Labour politicians to any talk of alliances and coalitions - is only going to leave us where already are: weak, isolated, and staring catastrophic defeat in the face.