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## **Contested spaces of hegemony: left alliances after the crisis**

### **Dave Featherstone**

In what none of us could have anticipated would have been her last editorial in *Soundings*, in November 2015, Doreen Massey offered her reflections on austerity and the current conjuncture, arguing that although times may have been hard for the left and there had been recent defeats as well as victories: ‘even five years ago most of these European challenges to neoliberalism could not have been imagined. They can now. Maybe there is here the potential fracturing of the ideological and political hegemony of neoliberalism that seemed so absent in the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis’.<sup>1</sup> The election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader was, for Doreen, an important sign that there was a potential fracturing of the ideological and political hegemony of neoliberalism, something that she had worked so hard to contribute to. She felt keenly the importance of providing political support to Corbyn and to his broader project, and also the need to position his election and leadership in a wider conjunctural analysis.

Positioning Corbyn in this way is significant is important, given that there have been relatively few attempts to situate his leadership on these terms. Gary Younge’s Stuart Hall Memorial Lecture was one insightful attempt to think about Corbyn as part of broader left alternatives such as Podemos and Syriza. He described Jeremy Corbyn as ‘the unlikely beneficiary of a moment in which a resurgent left, newly oriented towards electoral politics, has surprised itself with its ability to both challenge and even win’. He argued, however, that ‘what he’s not is the product of a movement that can sustain that challenge once it has been made’.<sup>2</sup> Younge’s account is a helpful attempt to think about Corbyn’s rise to prominence in conjunctural terms, that is in relation to the broader political context and relations that define the current post-crisis moment.

One of the issues that makes sustaining a concerted challenge to dominant political cultures much more challenging these days is the increasing geographical fragmentation of left and centre-left politics in the UK; and this article seeks to explore the implications this has for constructing progressive alliances and hegemonic politics. Coming out of discussions I had with Doreen when she was in Glasgow in December 2015 for a *Soundings* workshop, this article, which we had intended to co-write, seeks to make a contribution through thinking about the relationship between attempts to fracture the dominant political hegemony and the reconfigured terrain of left/centre-left parties and movements across the UK. I discuss three key elements within this heterogeneity. Firstly, there is the geographical fragmentation of the UK lefts, with a growing challenge to the Labour Party’s ability to hegemonise centre-left politics. Secondly, there is the challenge of engaging with discourses around regional inequality, and in particular with the Conservatives’ attempt to develop a clear political narrative around this through their account of the ‘Northern Powerhouse’. Thirdly, there is the question of how we might envision and construct alliances which build across these divisions. I argue that, while the logic of spatial division poses a

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<sup>1</sup> Massey, D. ‘Exhilarating Times’ *Soundings*, 61, 2015, p. 12

<sup>2</sup> Younge, G. ‘It’s abundantly clear that the left can gain ground- but it cannot yet hold it’ *Guardian*, 19th December, 2015.

number of challenges to the left, there are also possibilities for forging a post-neoliberal agenda.

### **Thinking hegemony and geography**

Doreen's political and geographical engagements were always animated by key political questions. She worried away at key problematics and challenges and was never content to fall back on left theoretical orthodoxies. Rather, she was always concerned to push at the limits of such approaches through applying them and thinking with them. One of the key ways in which she did this was to develop a compelling set of interventions in thinking about the relations between space, place and politics. These interventions were never concerned with thinking about geography as a kind of academic exercise: Doreen was concerned with understanding the ways in which struggles over geography were integral to the making of particular kinds of political strategies and identities. Further, she saw thinking geographically as providing indispensable tools for thinking about politics. Here I seek to build on her insights and approach to engage with the political questions posed by the current conjuncture, and the possibilities for alternatives.

Central to Doreen's contribution to our understandings of politics was the sense that geographical differentiation always involved 'more than some result of the spatial distribution of national phenomena'. Instead she positioned it as an always 'active element in the troubled production of ... national changes'.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s she gave an important sense of how regional divisions and antagonisms were foundational to the emergence of Thatcherism's class project. This argument was central to her book *Spatial Divisions of Labour*, where she analysed the contested geographies of deindustrialisation.

Doreen showed that uneven geographies were produced through political choices and engagements rather than being in some way inevitable. She was critical of attempts to naturalise regional inequality and to think about such issues in isolation from broader processes and relations. The recent refusal of the Conservatives to offer the kind of subsidies to the steel industry that they offered the banks, for example, is not just about privileging particular sectors of the economy: it is also about intensifying inequalities between different parts of the UK. The consequence will be that already depressed regions like South Wales, the North East and the Central Belt of Scotland are likely to be subjected to further job losses and the increased casualisation of work. And this Conservative refusal is also an intervention into the terms on which the regions of the UK are differentially integrated into globalised economic and political relations and circuits - and prioritises the interests of specific regions in relation to them.

But Doreen was not interested in simply understanding the processes that shaped uneven development and regional inequality: she was committed to challenging them. And she did so through innovative political strategies and thinking, for example in her involvement with projects like 'restructuring for labour'.<sup>4</sup> Such alternative political imaginations came out of her own political activity. For example, her involvement in

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<sup>3</sup> Massey, D. *World City* Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007, 79.

<sup>4</sup> See *World City*, p. 84.

the alliance of the new urban left with the miners during the 1984-5 strike, through the support group movement, which brought together groups that differed socially and politically as well as geographically, deepened her appreciation of the productive character of alliances and solidarities. In this regard, as she and Hilary Wainwright argued at the time, the support group movements showed that ‘industrial action’ and ‘new social movements’ could be mutually dependent rather than antagonistic.<sup>5</sup> They argued that the miners’ strike showed that some of the old institutions could be superseded and challenged without the abandonment of class politics’ (p168). Indeed Doreen argued that such a politics of solidarity could renew and reconfigure class relations and politics.

Her work in this regard was influenced by her involvement with the Hegemony discussion group in the early 1980s, with Stuart Hall, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. The group met to discuss new writing about hegemony, and its potentialities for refigured left strategies, and these political exchanges and conversations were part of the shared terrain that led to the formation of *Soundings* in the mid-1990s.<sup>7</sup> Gramsci was a central figure for the group, and it is interesting to note in this context that a key aspect of Gramsci’s originality was the way he positioned regional inequality as the product of political decisions and strategies, not just as something that is a ‘natural’ outcome.

Gramsci foregrounded questions of geography and uneven development, and was adamant that it was necessary to locate political formations and strategies in their particular geographical contexts. He saw such geographies as constitutive of political identities and solidarities, not as a passive backdrop to left struggles. His fine essay *Aspects of the Southern Question*, for example, develops a clear analysis of the challenges to constructing a hegemonic bloc presented by the uneven fissures between Southern and Northern Italy; these made it much more difficult to create alliances between peasant struggles in the South and workers’ factory occupations in the north.<sup>8</sup> This notion of contested spatial relations within Gramsci’s account of hegemony is often overlooked.

One of Doreen’s important contributions was to address much more systematically the implications of contested and uneven geographies for the construction of solidarities and alliances. A key way in which she did so was to think about the ways in which places are articulated and re-articulated through politics. She was attentive to political struggles over the terms through which places are produced, and about what they ‘stand for’, as well as the terms on which they are linked to other places. Through this attentiveness she articulated an understanding of the politics of conjuncture which was sensitive to the dynamics of particular places. She also emphasised that places could be important in producing/rearticulating conjunctural

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<sup>5</sup> Massey, D. and Wainwright, H. ‘Beyond the Coalfields: the Work of the Miners’ Support Groups’ in Beynon, H. (ed) *Digging Deeper* London: Verso, 149-168, emphasis in original

<sup>7</sup> See the discussion in ‘Stories So Far: A Conversation with Doreen Massey’ in Featherstone, D. and Painter, J. *Spatial Politics: Essays for Doreen Massey* Wiley, 253-266, p. 258.

<sup>8</sup> Gramsci, A. *Selected Political Writings, 1921--1926* London, Lawrence and Wishart,

forces in different ways, for example drawing attention to London's role in shaping (but also contesting) the emergence of neoliberalism.

This approach raises important questions about, and offers useful insights into, the ways in which we make sense of current UK left politics. It helps us identify what is at stake in the post-crisis conjuncture, and the nature of the broader connections that shape this political moment. It clarifies that struggles over the regions and constituent parts of the UK are an important part of attempts to fashion hegemonic narratives and positions: they are not - as they have all too often been regarded - a side show that can be ignored by the left.

### **The Northern Powerhouse and hegemonic struggle**

Ken Spours has argued that the Conservatives' hegemonic project has become clearer since their 2015 victory: in spite of their small majority, they are in the process of consolidating their grip on the English political landscape. 'The party ... is dominant in English politics outside the largest urban centres, and aims to consolidate its position in the South West and to move into the "Northern Powerhouse"'. He concludes that Osborne's ambition is to 'irreversibly detach the skilled working classes from allegiance to the Labour Party to make them part of a new Conservative political bloc'.<sup>9</sup>

Michael Rustin has observed that this analysis shares with mainstream Labour a preoccupation with electoral allegiances and prospects. Pointing to the limitations of such an approach as a way of viewing the political scene, he insists that there is an important difference between pursuing a hegemonic strategy in order to create a new dominant social bloc and aiming to secure a majority in Parliament.<sup>10</sup>

The limited geographical reach of the Conservative Party in both discursive and electoral terms has more significant implications than Spours suggests. As he notes, the Conservatives continue to have a marginal presence in Northern cities, even though they are beginning to regain a presence in Wales, and have now, rather unbelievably, become the official opposition in Scotland. And their policies seem to be designed to conjure a majority from whatever tools are to hand at a given time and place, rather than to construct a strategic vision. Zac Goldsmith's London mayoral campaign seemed to indicate a focus on trying to create specific electoral blocs, if necessary in vicious, divisive and racialised ways, rather than in any sense being indicative of a political aspiration to shape a broader political vision. (And it also further undermined the impression that Cameron has any real desire to create a refigured party that is at ease with the multi-ethnic constituencies of the UK's bigger cities.)

In this regard the 'Northern Powerhouse' is perhaps better thought of as a clear sign that the Conservatives, especially George Osborne, are trying to think about how to regain support in the North. This is not to be confused with a strategy that has any hegemonic aspiration. It certainly has not had any serious impact on reviving Toryism in urban areas in the north, as testified to by the use of terms such as 'Northern poor

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<sup>9</sup> The Osborne Supremacy', Ken Spours, *Renewal* 24.1 2016, p15.

<sup>10</sup> Rustin, M. How Should We Read the Present Tory Moment? Soundings blog, 2016.

house', or by the Conservative candidate coming sixth in the 2016 Liverpool Mayoral election (with 3.6 per cent of the vote). The strategy also has differentiated traction and impact within the north: it is strongly associated with particular cities, notably Manchester and Leeds, that are already relatively well positioned in economic terms, and thus has the potential to deepen intra-regional inequalities in pernicious ways.

A key challenge for any hegemonic project is to shape common sense in ways which are effective in achieving more than a surface or strategic buy-in. In this context, while there have been some insightful critiques of the Powerhouse strategy from left figures and movements, the lack of a convincing alternative narrative is a matter for concern, as Craig Berry has noted.<sup>11</sup> In the same article he also notes that the gap between local Labour leaders in the north and the central party 'has grown into a chasm in recent months'.

One source of this problem has been a failure to critique the broader terms of debate which shape the 'Northern Powerhouse' project. In particular there was been little challenge to what Doreen identified as the 'hegemonising effect' of the discourse in which London figures as a national 'golden goose', whose growth should be supported above all else. As she argued, the effect of this narrative can be detected 'in the fact that even those arguing the case for northern cities seem on occasions constrained to follow the line'.<sup>12</sup> Some elements within Labour, most notably some city leaders, have bought in to this broader set of discourses, and this has undermined the ground on which Northern powerhouse can be challenged. Thus Joe Anderson, leader of Liverpool council, has argued that: 'It's a sad reflection on the Labour party that we're having to do business with a Tory government who are cutting and bludgeoning us on the one hand, but at least they're moving in a pragmatic way to devolve power.' Andrew Adonis has a very similar analysis. His report on the economy for the 2014 Labour policy review frames questions of regional growth in relation to a lack of competitiveness and a productivity/skills gap. This makes it more difficult to articulate an alternative set of more equal and progressive regional alternatives.

While it may have had limited impact on the Conservatives' electoral fortunes in Northern cities, the Northern Powerhouse nonetheless offers a powerful discursive framing of questions around regional inequality and 'the North', which may yet shape political debate in significant ways. The necessity of posing a dynamic alternative account is all the more important given that there is a notable lack of active participation and identification among Labour supporters in key northern cities, which leaves them vulnerable to UKIP. In this regard, while the particular context of Scotland post-referendum is unique, some of the underlying tensions that have led to the dramatic loss of support for Labour in the Central Belt are not, and it is important to recognise this.

Thus the Liverpool Labour Councillor Steve Munby has recently argued of the support base of Militant in the city in the 1980s:

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<sup>11</sup> Berry, C. 'Red Pepper 2016: 25

<sup>12</sup> Massey, *World City*, 101-102

There was a wave of working-class people in their 30s, 40s and 50s who lost their jobs from the decimation of unskilled manual occupations. They'd be in their 50s, 60s or 70s now. Militant particularly appealed to that layer of people. They'd been left high and dry and we haven't really known what to do to help them- I mean they're stuffed. Capital of Culture didn't help them, or they've just ended up on the long term sick ... there is a generation of really funny, literate, interesting people in Liverpool who were left high and dry by Thatcherism, and they matter.<sup>13</sup>

Addressing the needs of such constituencies remains a problem for Labour - across the North and elsewhere.

Such discontent is increasingly susceptible to being channelled and politically articulated towards the populist right. Thus Geoff Eley has argued that disaffection resulting from 'the underlying disorder of societal dislocation associated with contemporary economic change' has been racialised. The right gains traction because these changes produce 'exactly the multifarious anxieties about boundaries whose interconnectedness xenophobia then readily cements'.<sup>14</sup> This underlines the need to articulate alternative political antagonisms from those currently being mobilised to shape the political moment in exclusionary and chauvinistic ways. A key way to do this is through challenging the dogma that the unfettered market is the only way that societies can be effectively run.

There are significant alternatives to draw on here, some of which have come out of local struggles against privatisation and outsourcing, including the community and union alliances forged against privatisation in Newcastle Council in 1999-2000, when the Unison branch in the Council led an innovative campaign to challenge outsourcing and create more dynamic public service. As Hilary Wainwright put it, they sought to challenge the culture of the council: 'the way some of the services were managed began to be more dynamically public; the involvement of all levels of staff became more openly valued; and it began to create a positive relationship with service users and local communities'.<sup>15</sup> This led to 'a democracy-driven process of public service reform', which became a model for resisting privatisation, and demonstrated a feasible alternative.<sup>16</sup> This and similar struggles were among the alternatives discussed at the Porto Alegre World Social Forum, helping to create a stronger sense of the possibility of alternatives to the neoliberal world order.

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<sup>13</sup> Munby cited by Frost, D. and North, P. *Militant Liverpool: A City on the Edge*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013: 206.

<sup>14</sup> Eley, G. 'Fascism Then and Now' *Socialist Register* 2016, 91-117, quote on p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Wainwright, H. *Reclaim the State: Experiments in Popular Democracy* London: Verso, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Wainwright, H. 'Place Beyond Place and the Politics of 'Empowerment'' in Featherstone, D.J. and Painter, J. *Spatial Politics: Essays for Doreen Massey* Wiley, 2013, 235-252, p. 238-239.

There are also other experiments that have potential. In a recent issue of *Soundings* Steve Munby made a useful contribution in outlining the ways in which Northern councils are currently already trying to do things differently, partly through breaking the dogma that privatisation works best. While some have argued that Munby is too accepting about working within the cost-cutting logics that have been contested by anti-austerity movements, his account of what effectively is the ‘remunicipalisation’ of waste collection in Liverpool shows that, paradoxically, challenging privatisation as a dogma can both save money and create more flexible, responsive and popular services.<sup>17</sup> He notes that, instead of ‘relationships dominated by contracts, which promote centralisation and rigidity’, Liverpool councillors have promoted relationships ‘at ward level, involving residents, councillors and the bin crews’. This has provided ‘a better and more flexible service, at less cost’.<sup>18</sup> Other initiatives include the Preston Co-operative Initiative, which has committed the council to supporting an alternative approach to economic development.

These actually existing alternatives to market-led regional growth offer significant possibilities. They have more potential than a simple anti-austerity agenda when it comes to opening up a political space for a dynamic and more equal regional strategy. Anti-austerity rhetoric often seems to operate within a hegemonic terrain defined by the right. As Craig Berry argues, Corbyn’s strategy to convince the electorate of the ‘macro-economic erroneousness and ethical callousness’ of the austerity agenda will probably do little to dent the ideological hegemony of the neoliberal ideas that underpin austerity. This is because few people actually welcome austerity: ‘the government’s ingenuity lies in the co-evolution of austerity with a set of political objectives, such as greater local autonomy, that the electorate is more likely to support’.<sup>19</sup>

### **Devolution and asymmetries of power**

Devolution has added a further dimension to discussions of regional political difference. It has opened up political spaces and discourses that pose a real challenge to austerity narratives. In Scotland in particular, austerity has become central to the mobilisation of alternative ways of thinking about politics. Indeed the SNP’s positioning of itself as an ‘anti-austerity’ party has been one of the ways in which it has so effectively hegemonised (centre left!) politics in Scotland. It has made anti-austerity politics and movements for independence synonymous. But it has in part been gifted this ground. And, as Gerry Mooney notes elsewhere in this issue (px), its position has only limited substance: the party has managed to combine a rhetorical commitment to anti-austerity politics with stealth austerity measures, as, for example, in their Council Tax freeze. This is certainly not a politics that brings the broader neoliberal project into political contestation. The 2016 SNP election campaign was

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<sup>17</sup> See Blamire, J. ‘Exploring the Potentiality of Anti-Austerity Resistance in the UK Context: Observations from Liverpool’ <http://joshblamire.weebly.com/resources.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Munby, S. ‘Miracles Can Happen...’ *Soundings* 61, 2015, p.45

<sup>19</sup> Berry, C. ‘Balancing Britain’ *Red Pepper*, February – March, 2016: 22-25.

full of centrist and cautious pronouncements: thus, for instance, they drew back from advocating a tax increase for top earners.

In seeking to understand the implications of a more heterogeneous politics for the post-crisis conjuncture it is helpful to position it within a longer unfolding of the spatial politics of devolution and its consequences. As Danny Mackinnon has argued, UK devolution is a ‘process rather than an event’, and that the asymmetries between England and the ‘Celtic fringe’ - Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – have become more pronounced over time.<sup>20</sup> A key problem here is that Labour Party strategy, at least centrally, has not grasped this processual nature of devolution. They have tended to see it as a one-off change that would have the double effect of seeing off the challenge of insurgent ‘nationalists’ while simultaneously - at least in Scotland and Wales - delivering parliaments and assemblies where Labour would have a built-in, and perpetual, dominance.

It should be noted, though, that the devolution process has been negotiated in different ways in different nations. In Wales, Rhodri Morgan’s ‘Clear Red Water Strategy’, which explicitly put distance between Welsh Labour and Blairism, was part of a much more dynamic response to devolution than that of Scottish Labour.<sup>21</sup> This showed the possibilities that devolution could open up for creative political strategies and projects, but also the necessity of actively constructing a distinctive political project in devolved contexts. This is partly what has enabled Labour in Wales to retain a sense of political momentum and narrative – something that Labour in Scotland would appear to have lost for the foreseeable future.

The asymmetries which Mackinnon notes have not just divided the left in different parts of the UK: they have also been part of the dissolution of one of the main ways in which the post-war consensus was framed within the Labour Party. As Satnam Virdee has argued, this was based on the assumption that, over time, socialist nationalist struggles for social justice and democratisation, and their eventual ‘ideological incorporation’ into the nation, would be mediated by the Labour Party and the trade union movement.<sup>22</sup> In this regard there is a relation between the politics of de-industrialisation and the rupturing of the post-war social settlement.

Devolution has also offered important possibilities for the left however: Scotland and Wales have retained a more social democratic approach, ‘resisting market-oriented reforms and emphasising professional values, public health, planning and service integration’.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the representation of greens and socialists in Scotland has already put new issues onto the political agenda, and the new Scottish Green MSPs - such as the radical land rights campaigner Andy Wightman - are likely to carry on

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<sup>20</sup> Mackinnon, D. ‘Devolution, State Restructuring and Policy Divergence in the UK’ *Geographical Journal* 181: 1, 201, 47-56, 47.

<sup>21</sup> Davies, N. and Williams, D. *Clear Red Water: Devolution and Socialist Politics* London: Francis and Taylor Publishers, 2009,

<sup>22</sup> Virdee, S *Class, Racism and the Racialised Outsider* Palgrave, Macmillan, 2014, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Mackinnon, 52.

with this.<sup>24</sup> The election of two People Before Profit AMs in Derry and West Belfast is also significant. There have also been attempts to forge alternatives within the devolved nations, especially for some of the de-industrialised regions at the sharp end of neoliberal restructuring. Thus Plaid Cymru's *Greenprint for the Valleys* represents a useful attempt to think about an alternative environment and economic strategy for regional development. This is particularly significant in a context of proposed steel plant closures and struggles against open-cast mining.<sup>26</sup>

The response to all this from the two main Westminster parties has been instructive. Left gains in devolved nations have frequently been articulated as unfair by the political right in UK. Westminster Labour, meanwhile, has often remained aloof from such gains, rather than promoting them as exemplars of what a more ambitious UK Labour government could achieve. In this regard the right, while gaining limited traction and presence in either the Welsh assembly or the Scottish parliament, has been able to use devolution in a strategic fashion. In the 2015 Westminster election debates the Tories sought to intensify the differences between the centre-left parties, and between different parts of the UK, and benefited from exploiting these divisions while simultaneously playing on fears that a Labour government would be in the SNP's pocket. This became a crucial part of the political narrative of the election.

These developments show the importance of fostering a political culture of exchange and alliance, rather than division, between different left/centre-left parties. There are also real resonances between the ruptural moment represented by the independence movement in Scotland and the desire for change that crystallised around Corbyn's election to the Labour leadership. The political spaces these movements have opened up have the potential to be significant. This suggests the possibility - if different conceptions of politics could be intensified/aligned - of shaping a new challenge to the existing neoliberal hegemony of UK politics, of constructing something that might look like a post-neoliberal consensus. Both in Scotland and in the Labour Party there has been a significant re-engagement with political processes and parties: the SNP and Greens dramatically increased their membership after the referendum, as did the Labour Party after Corbyn's election.

These commonalities represent a significant possibility, but their geographical fragmentation cautions against any sense that they could be easily united in to a 'national popular' strategy as of old. In this sense there are lessons to be learned from the failure of Ed Miliband's One Nation Labour strategy within this more pluralised terrain. Equally, though - and contra to suggestions by Corbyn and McDonnell - there is little sense that an appeal to class loyalties could transcend such divided geographies, not least because this misses the extent to which identifications of class and nation are interwoven. This poses the question of how a broader hegemonic politics might be fashioned that connects and articulates different sites and places, and different political parties and traditions on the left, without linking them to a singular national project. Thinking through what terrain might be shaped here is central to thinking about the future of left politics in the UK.

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<sup>24</sup> Clear Red Water Book

<sup>26</sup> Plaid Cymru *Greenprint for the Valleys*

### **Elements of an alternative hegemony**

The Corbyn project has often been posed as a ‘return’ to a more ‘authentic’ version of the Labour Party. There are, however, many dangers associated with this narrative, not least that of romanticising what the Labour Party has actually been in the past. There is clearly still a need for a ‘modernising’ project - albeit one that is very different from the version advocated by New Labour. There is a need for a modernisation that engages with questions raised by changes in society and economy, and by feminism and anti-racist politics, but also finds different ways of relating to other left parties, movements and constituencies. This further underlines the importance of constructing a hegemonic left project for the UK in the wake of the crisis.

This is not a question of finding fixed positions that transcend context. Engaging with hegemonic politics is always about constructing the political field and alliances in the here and now. What is crucial is how the left articulates particular issues - housing, environmental politics, Trident - as part of a broader approach and narrative in relation to a post-crisis context. As Stuart Hall argued in relation to Thatcherism and popular conceptions of politics, “‘strategy’ cannot be a matter of ideological politics alone. It is also a question of how to construct around those conceptions a popular politics or, to put it more simply, the difficult business of constructing alliances’”.<sup>27</sup> This is about much more than recognising that in tactical terms Labour and the SNP are likely to need to develop some kind of alliance, or at least rapprochement, in order to defeat the Tories. Rather, it addresses the issue of what popular conceptions of politics different constituencies on the left of UK politics might bring into play, and how they might be articulated to forge elements of a post-neoliberal consensus, especially now that even the IMF are beginning to critique neoliberalism and to argue that austerity doesn’t work.

It is also perhaps obvious, but nonetheless really important, to emphasise that the SNP, Plaid, the Greens and Labour are operating on broadly similar intellectual/political terrain. What unites them politically is far more significant than political differences, especially in relation to the Tories. Shifting political discourses open up possibilities for developing new ways of articulating popular resentments about neoliberalism’s imposition of austerity on the majority while enriching a revanchist few. This has the potential to shape alternative ‘popular conceptions of politics’ in ways which speak across straightforward left/right constituencies.

While the legacy of Labourism is still a major problem for attempts to think about left alliances and convergences, there are possibilities that need to be nurtured. There are hopeful signs, for example, that the SNP, Plaid, Greens and Labour might find common cause around key issues such as opposing the Trade Union Bill, in ways which may have significant effects. There are also possibilities opened up by the depth of Corbyn’s roots in diverse social and political movements. The paradox that he has deeper recognition from these movements than many of his own MPs offers a historic opportunity to shift some of the long standing dynamics of Labour’s aloofness from various struggles and place-based politics. There is the potential here to redraw the terms on which Labour engages with ‘community’ politics and other struggles.

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<sup>27</sup> Hall, S. *Hard Road to Renewal* London, Verso, 1988. 280.

A key example here is the way in which tax has emerged as central to the terms of political debate, in ways which would have seemed impossible in the period associated with New Labour and its intense relaxedness about the rich. This indicates the potential for a more collective and fair politics to be shaped through debates around tax, and through harnessing the anger and resentment around large scale tax-avoidance. These debates also suggest the potential strength of campaigns in which different elements of the left work together, or at least in relation to each other: the direct action movement UK Uncut has been central to making tax and tax avoidance central to political debate and agendas, as have campaigns by unions such as the PCS (Though it has to be said that, while tax avoidance itself has been politicised, there is still reluctance among mainstream politicians to propose tax rises. Kezia Dugdale lost badly on such a platform in Scotland, while Sturgeon retreated over re-introducing the 50% high tax rate.) There is the potential here for developing a politics based on mobilising a widespread and intensifying sense of unfairness in the wake of the crisis. And, in Doreen Massey's terms, there is an opportunity to make a decisive challenge to what the UK stands for internationally: to reject its role as a hub for a networked set of offshore tax havens and instead choose to play a more progressive and equitable role.

This renewed emphasis on tax as a collective good also offers possibilities for thinking again about the role of the public sector and forms of public ownership. This is an area where there are interesting convergences emerging: the SNP, Plaid, Labour and Greens all support developing public/community ownership in significant ways. Thus Plaid, Labour and the Greens all support bringing railways back into public ownership, while the SNP has advocated community ownership of land. Patrick Harvie of the Scottish Greens scored a notable success in the recent Scottish Leaders' debate when he attacked the toxic legacy of PFI in Scotland's jerry-built schools.<sup>28</sup> This is a further illustration of the shifting terms of debate and the political opportunities this can open up. Public ownership is also an area where there are a number of ongoing social movement and/or union-led struggles, for example the campaign of the RMT to keep the ferry service Calmac in the public sector. And it is certainly not just the left Labour 'usual suspects' who are making such cases. Tristram Hunt's recent speech revisiting traditions of municipal socialism suggested potentially broader support for questioning of neoliberalism ownership models, and posed interesting questions about how they relate to different articulations of localism.

As Andy Cumbers has argued, there is currently a definite potential for reconfiguring ways of thinking about public ownership, and going beyond the binary opposition between neoliberal private ownership and top-down state public ownership, and there are important connections here with green/climate politics: the remunicipalisation of energy provision has become an important terrain of struggle and of the forging of alternative social and environmental relations, particularly in German cities such as Hamburg and Berlin. There are also possibilities for creating new forms of ownership for emerging renewable energy sectors such as wind and tidal energy, and these have

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/12/edinburgh-schools-pfi-racket-crumbling-scotland-tax-avoiding-governing-class>

the potential to shape different social relations rather than to simply reproduce neoliberal ones.

The state of debate around environmental politics also underlines the failure of the Tory modernising project, and the Conservatives' evacuation of this ground. And the resurgence (or maybe changing same) of Tory racism in Zac Goldsmith's mayoral campaign - a further retreat from Tory detoxification - highlights the importance of challenging divisive rhetoric around migration. These are both areas where lines of antagonism can be drawn between the Conservatives/UKIP and the different left/centre-left parties.

In the case of immigration there is an important opportunity to engage with a positive articulation of ordinary multiculturalism. As Stuart Hall argued, 'race' can function as a 'lens through which people come to perceive that a crisis is developing'; it can be 'the framework through which the crisis is experienced'.<sup>29</sup> In this regard, it is important to move beyond Labour's passive role in these debates. While it is clear that there are concerns around migration among some sections of the working class and other voters, this is hardly surprising given the centrality of these questions to mainstream media and political discourse.

A key challenge here has to be to attempt to shift the terms of debate in this regard, rather than to merely act as an echo chamber for such views. Cruddas et al in their report on the 2015 election may not be entirely wrong when they argue that Labour 'is perceived by voters as a party that supports an 'open door' approach to immigration, lacks credibility on the economy, and is a 'soft touch' on welfare spending.' But there are key implications for what political narrative you develop to deal with this situation rather than just to accept this characterisation and the values that underpin it. As Doreen argued 'Labour does not put in that effort to create shifts in people's hearts and minds. It just listens to focus groups. It doesn't itself go out and try and create a new common sense, a new narrative'.<sup>30</sup>

One aspect of a new narrative here is the importance of making connections here with the ways in which austerity has had key racialized/ gendered/ classed impacts.<sup>31</sup> The challenge here in terms of hegemonic politics is to articulate a challenge to and go beyond the racialized, gendered and classed divisions that neoliberal strategies and precarious working practices thrive on and intensify.<sup>32</sup> As Tim Roche of the GMB has

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<sup>29</sup> Hall, S. 'Racism and Reaction: A public talk arranged by the British Sociological Association and given in London on 2 May 1978', in *Five Views of Multi-Racial Britain* London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1978, pp. 23–35, p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> Hall, S. and Massey, D. 'Interpreting the Crisis' in Davison, S. and Harris, K. (ed) *The Neoliberal Crisis* London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2015, 66.

<sup>31</sup> [Vacchelli, Elena](#) and [Kathrecha, Preeti](#) and [Gyte, Natalie](#) (2015) *Is it really just the cuts? neo-liberal tales from the women's voluntary and community sector in London*. *Feminist Review*, 109 . pp. 180-189

<sup>32</sup> Davison, S. and Shire, G. 2015. *Kilburn Manifesto*

recently argued there is a pressing need, particularly in the context of the harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric of the EU referendum debates, to be more pro-active in offering an alternative narrative. There are potential constituencies to be shaped and articulated here which can reach beyond traditional left union and party structures which have not tended to engage effectively with the struggles and grievances of precarious workers. This is important as potential constituencies to be brought into and potential to engage with left political project in important ways.

It is clearly difficult to construct hegemonic positions when your primary concern is with 'hanging on'. In that sense of a change in 'style' of politics in certain ways which might be more aligned with sense of radical democratic left politics through shaping different alliances has potential. It also has the potential to engage with and intensify some of the shifting terms of political discourses to shape elements of a post-neoliberal political agenda.