

# Radical Politics, Left Convergence and the War of Position

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## ABSTRACT

One of the central problems in leftist thought in the twenty-first century has been the ability to unite its various parts in order to develop some form of wider convergence capable of challenging the post-cold war neoliberal capitalist order. Despite numerous rich critiques of the workings of neoliberal capitalism, political strategy has all too often been recued to a renewal of a dated twentieth-century statist project on the one hand and an ambiguous process of civil contestation on the other. This article builds on recent calls for convergence on the left, particularly between the grand traditions of Marxism and Anarchism, which have seen an unparalleled renaissance in innovative development in the last thirty years. It suggests that an open-ended framework of Gramsci's 'war of position' provides an avenue for this convergence to build forms of political strategy. Whilst Gramscian hegemony has often been understood as one of the problematic concepts within leftist thought and indeed one that has often led to divergence, it suggests that inclusive version of the term as applied by Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams remains one in which convergence can develop and thrive.

**Keywords:** *Left Convergence, War of Position, political strategy, hegemony, anti-capitalism, left-nationalism*

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The Post-Cold War political arena has remained problematic and enigmatic for the contemporary left. The dilemma of how the left should deal with a) the collapse of 'real' or 'state' socialism in its different forms<sup>1</sup> and b) the advance of neoliberal economic globalisation has left a legacy of academic and theoretical posturing but a lack of practical direction. The resurgence of the left has seen since the end of the cold war developments as diverse as the Zapatistas Uprising, the growth of the anti-globalisation/global justice movements, the establishment of the World Social

Forums, the post-crisis formation of Occupy and the advancements of so-called 'left' populism. Academic commentaries have followed: there has been an explosion of neo-Gramscian, post-Gramscian, autonomous Marxist, libertarian Marxist, anarchist and post-anarchist analysis, alongside the wider traditions of post-structuralism, Marxism and anarchism. Commentary from the left has reached levels it perhaps had never previously reached. Yet, despite this, neoliberalism has survived one of the most significant economic crashes of the modern capitalist era and it has been the reactionary right, as opposed to the left that has mobilised.

As such, we see ourselves in a position where, despite the sheer wealth of academic endeavour, the left remains politically redundant, with arguably much of its struggle being won within the terrain of identity politics as opposed to that of material redistribution. Indeed, it has been the right, itself devoid of any significant academic advancements, that has sought to utilise leftist intellectualism for its own gain by adopting its strategic apparatus as a means of development.<sup>2</sup> The question, of the form current left strategy should take – and indeed is currently looking to take – is impossible to answer here but also one that has been visited and revisited since the respective versions of twentieth-century socialism went into decline. On the one hand, we might indeed suggest that whilst actions at the formal institutional level are useful, the increase of action in the last decade of disruptive politics has shown that not all resistance is indeed futile in the neoliberal age (Bailey et al. 2015). Indeed, following the autonomous Marxist tradition and in the – now classical – study of the Zapatistas by John Holloway, it could be suggested that struggles can successfully be fought and won on the everyday level by contesting the fabrics that underline the very productive relations that neoliberal principles were built upon. However, these victories appear shallow when placed alongside wider realities. One might at some level be able to change the world without taking power per se, yet the institutional frameworks that bind the realities of international politics continue to re-enforce the legitimacy of power and its class dynamics.

This piece will argue that whilst forms of contestation to neoliberalism have been plentiful, they have not resulted in developing an opposition in the manner that twentieth-century political socialism did. In addition, whilst conventional forms of political opposition have taken post-cold war socialism back to the centre (in the form of the new left in Latin America and the success of parties such as *Podemos* and *Syriza*, as well as individuals such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders), there remains a lack of a specific socialist programme for the twenty-first century. For all the theorising on the state, identity and the shifting dynamic of sovereignty, cynics could conclude that in terms of practical politics all we are left

with are soundbites. Alternatively, they could equally conclude that that left-wing political parties in practice have not significantly moved on from the twentieth-century form of 'left nationalism'.

The response calls for a renewed commitment to a left convergence (Prichard et. al. 2012; Prichard and Worth 2016, 2020). Without such convergence, left-wing opposition will continue to grow in the social scientific laboratories of the academy without finding any practical coherence in the 'real' world. As a result, there is a need to on the one hand build an opposition that provides for a coherent strategy in a manner that relegates contestation to particular struggles on the margins of society, but on the other, allows for a political framework that does not turn back to twentieth-century statist or left nationalism. As such a return to Gramsci and to the notion of the war of position remains the more viable and coherent method to achieve this. Despite the calls for a complete break with Gramsci and the Gramscian logic (Day 2005), I argue that it remains the most accessible and coherent way of understanding how a viable opposition capable of transformation might proceed. This becomes especially attractive when understanding the notion of the war of position from within the lens of cultural studies commentators such as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, who provide a more diverse understanding of the realities of political opposition and transformation.

## **THE LEFT IN THE ERA OF NEOLIBERALISM**

The dynamics of left-inspired opposition to neoliberalism has been shaped by several different characteristics resulting from the appearance of global political society. Firstly, the process of globalisation was one that dominated debates within the social sciences for the first two decades after 1991. Whether 'real', 'overplayed' or 'imagined' (see for example Hirst and Thompson 1995), globalisation was seen to transform the way politics and economics operated. At the heart of this has been the question of the nation-state and whether any left response requires a transnational or global response, as opposed to one located within separate sovereign entities. Again, many traditional left-wingers who retain the commitment of national self-determinism as a prerequisite to change, continue to argue that any form of internationalism relies upon the right of the individual sovereign entity to fuse partnerships within a statist framework (Lapavistas 2018; Mitchell and Fazi 2017). Others, such as the late Samir Amin, suggested that socialist parties must adopt a form of internationalism that works for the benefit of humanity at large and therefore build a solidarity within workers in advance, whereby national sacrifices would have to be given to empower the international proletariat at large

(Amin 2018). This position has perhaps been most evident in debates over the EU within left parties. For whilst there has been agreement from all quarters in their opposition to the troika and its economic management of the crisis, divergence continues to exist over what position to take to regional governance. Much support has been given towards the construction of a European-wide response to the European Union (EU) by utilising the new political space forged by integration to build towards a position where a 'new Europe is possible'. Yet many have rejected this as unfeasible due to the undemocratic structures that propelled this integration in the first place (Wilkinson 2021). Euro-sceptic arguments come from both the wider internationalist position and from the logistics of left-nationalism.

Arguments from the left that supported Brexit, for example, reflected these positions with some coming from the position that the EU itself was a barrier to any meaningful form of internationalism due to its fortress nature and its own neo-imperialist ambitions (Callinicos 2016). Here, the emphasis on campaigns such as freedom of movement, humanitarianism and international solidarity could be forged across the region to open it up towards wider global emancipation. Yet, these were largely marginalised by the more dominant 'lexit' position which reinforced the importance of sovereignty and self-determination as the only real route towards radical renewal (Tuck 2020). This position indeed tended to reflect traditional calls to reclaim a socialism based upon popular sovereignty and the mission of building national socialism. For example, the aftermath of the crisis in Greece led to some such as the former Syriza parliamentarian and economist Costas Lapavistas to call for a disintegration of the EU in favour of a renewal of sovereignty on which the principle of twentieth-century left-nationalism rests (Lapavistas 2018).

The different positions on Brexit provide a useful illustration of how difficult establishing a left strategy is, even at the spatial level. One of the unique features of the globalisation of neoliberalism is that capital has advanced at a level whereby working out what level to leverage a struggle to contain it becomes problematic. It is perhaps here where the autonomous Marxists and the wider spirit of anarchism have an advantage. Here, the spontaneous method of protest, disruption and contestation provides a suitable method for agitation that is more effective than the construction of a sustained project (Bailey 2018). Indeed, one can also recall the spirit of Rosa Luxemburg here, and her conviction that any preoccupation with strategy merely reinforces bourgeois practices. Meaningful revolutionary change thus emerges from the transformative process and any attempt at building precise programmes only serve to limit what is possible (Luxemburg 1971). Yet, at the same time, this form of articulated protest requires a wider logic of action.

Contestation must be consistent across the different levels of its leverage if it is to provide any meaningful form.

The 'turn' towards protest politics has been illustrated from the late 1980s onwards, beginning with the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe and then becoming prevalent in the 1990s during the emergence of direct-action groups and DIY culture (McKay 1998). Drawing on Guy Debord's spirit of situationism, such groups combined artistic performance alongside protest for wider effect (Barnard 2004). By the time the WTO Ministerial Council met in Seattle in 1999, the era of the mass demonstration had begun, and it was the mobilisation of such groups at high-ranking meetings of international organisations that would become the fulcrum to what become initially known as the 'anti-globalisation movement'. As David Graeber observed, the move away from a politics which pressures a government towards changing its behaviour towards one that looks to re-invent the whole process of democracy was beginning (Graeber 2002). Yet, unlike Luxemburg's logic whereby a new form of politics would emerge out of the dialectical process, Graeber saw this as being indicative of a turn towards anarchism. After all, as many of the various environmentalist, anti-corporate and anti-capitalist groups that emerged in the 1990s identified with anarchism, if they identified with anything, then 'anarchism was at the heart and was the soul' of the movement (Graeber 2002, p62)

Yet, many tried to claim the anti-globalisation/Global Justice Movement as their own. Post-structuralism has shown that emancipatory spaces are opened by contesting the way power is wielded by institutions. As such, protest groups can be considered 'critical social movements' (Walker 1988). Likewise, Foucault's understanding of the counter-conduct – forms of agency that struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others – can be used to understand forms of protest (Odysseos, Death and Malmvig 2010). Perhaps the most useful contributors here are those that have tried to fuse forms of post-structuralism within the wider anarchist tradition. Newman and Rossdale both claim to understand how new forms of left-wing opposition is expressed and look for emancipatory potential in groups that confront authoritarian expressions of power. Both dismiss the notion that anti-neoliberal resistance comes from traditional political forms of representation (Newman 2007; Rossdale 2019). This has also been said of the autonomist Marxists, who, whilst staying committed to an orthodox anti-Leninist reading of Marx, have recognised the change in focus of strategic political action. In doing so they have also provided significant insight into the development of the post-cold war left, particularly with their focus on the *Zapatistas* (Day 2005).

Yet, if the anti-globalisation/Global Justice Movement was considered as being a step away from traditional forms of organised political agency, then the establishment of the World Social Forum (WSF) and the success of the Latin American left could be seen as a step back. Despite being characterised as an 'open space', the WSF was built on empowering a collection of NGOs and grassroots movements towards mobilising a political movement capable of organising the left towards electoral success. The connection of the Brazilian Workers Party with the WSF, along with the appearance of several party-political leaders at its various forums brought formal politics 'back in', despite its rejection of any firm framework as such, in favour of an 'open space' to explore potential alternatives to neoliberalism (Whittaker 2002). The success of the 'pink tide' across Latin America reinforced the conviction that the political party was back as the main pioneer for a socialist alternative to neoliberalism. It also reinforced the notion that socialist parties had now transformed from a twentieth-century model that looked to establish state-centric forms of national regulatory socialism, to one that acknowledged the importance of globalisation and of building transnational networks. As the nation-state had 'internationalised' its economic strategy with the globalisation of the market, then left strategies needed to equally look outside of the state and build transnational partnerships if it was to succeed in socialising the form of such a market (Cox 1987).

For the left, the pink tide in South America might have gained significant importance, but it was also short lived. There were also many claims that it contained huge differences in scope between, say, the oil dependent-Chavez-centric approach taken in Venezuela, the Morales-led indigenous centric model in Bolivia and the NGO-led forms of governance in Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay – too many, in fact to be considered as a single phenomenon (Ellner 2020). Yet, despite its shortcomings, it did forge the idea of a radical left party that would be recreated in the aftermath of financial crisis. The electoral success of Syriza, Podemos and of the left in Iceland, Portugal and Cyprus were to differing degrees, all moulded by the rejection of neoliberalism seen in the pink tide. All also gained significantly from the mobilisation of protest movements and provided the political left with a substantial departure from the Third Way rhetoric which dominated the left in the 1990s. As a result, the election of Jeremy Corbyn, a left-wing veteran of protest politics, as leader of the UK Labour Party, which, under Tony Blair had represented Third Way neoliberal engagement, was a watershed moment for the political left.

Corbyn's four-year period as Labour leader provides us with perhaps the most suitable case study to assess the form of the left. In keeping with similar develop-

ments, Corbyn relied upon a network of grass-roots activists looking to build a wider movement for change. The Labour Party under Corbyn grew significantly in membership, with groups such as Momentum emerging to provide a wider network of support to mobilise. Yet, his time in office was mired by an extraordinary period where his leadership was undermined by a parliamentary party largely opposed to him, the run-up to, campaign and fall-out from the Brexit referendum and a fall-out with the Jewish community questioning the way debates on Zionism were being introduced and handled within the party. A relatively radical manifesto emerged from the 2017 General Election, that looked to balance moderate moves towards public ownership of national entities with commitments towards international tax regulations and ethical forms of production (Labour Party 2017). Corbyn was accompanied by a whole collection of academic advisors, keen to utilise a raft of academic ideas and alternatives that had been developing throughout the neoliberal era (for example Stiglitz, Piketty and Graeber himself). As a result, the ideas inherent in the 2017 manifesto appeared to be a work in progress. Against the odds and against a barrage of opposition from the popular press not witnessed since the early 1980s (many from within the Labour Party itself), Labour managed to gain their best election result since 2005, embarrassing many of those in the parliamentary party.

2017 was perhaps the high point for the twenty-first century left in terms of party politics. For a new left project to come so close to power in one of the most economically advanced states led to a belief that something significant was developing. The success of the Bernie Sanders campaign in the 2016 Democratic presidential candidacy race, coupled alongside a commitment towards contesting the very fabric of 'corporate capitalism' created an environment which suggested that a significant transnational moment might be building (Sanders 2016). Sanders' popularity and appeal for mobilisation set the wheels in motion for a renewed campaign by either him – or, due to his age – his brand of politics, in 2020. Instead, a tired Sanders would drop out of the 2020 campaign allowing Biden a free run. The year before, Corbyn, besieged by Brexit, mass resignations, claims of anti-Semitism within the party and a renewed media assault, was soundly defeated in another general election. His successor Keir Starmer dismantled the Corbyn project, expelled him from the parliamentary party, excluded nearly all his shadow cabinet from his own and began to purge further members from the wider party amidst mass resignations. Elsewhere, Syriza, which had swept to office in the aftermath of the debt crisis were seen to capitulate to the troika and never recovered, whilst Podemos stalled on several issues, including failure to endorse their support for Catalan separatism.

Despite the development of these new left movements,<sup>3</sup> there was still a lack of clarity in terms of the direction they appeared to move (Worth 2019). Much was made of potentially new innovative forms of economic endeavour that would provide alternatives to neoliberalism, but there was a lack of precision about how these would develop in practice. As political entities remain forged at the national level, then any move towards endorsing transnational ideas for public co-operatives or ownership cannot really be developed. Likewise, whole-scale nationalisation programmes would appear to merely ratify a national-first form of nationalism particularly when looking at the workings of the global economy. Yet nearly all have been committed towards supporting some elements of nationalisation and resorted to the spatial commitment to ‘nationalise’ that typified twentieth-century socialism, over the ideological commitment of ‘public ownership’. This was particularly noted with the Labour Party, which after looking to build on a balanced form of radicalism in 2017, turned, in an almost panicked form, to a more traditional state-focussed support for public ownership in 2019. To the anarchist and to a less extent, the post-structuralist, this move is not surprising. Indeed, some would suggest that by working within the political framework of the state, traditional statist practices are always going to take over and neutralise radicalism (Day 2005). Therefore, as the configuration of state-sovereignty exists as the only legitimate expression of formal political power, any party that works within it is going to embark upon a statist – or nationalist – direction. The anarchist tradition could further lay claim that, as it looks to distinctly reject the state, it has far more clarity in its outlook than the so-called traditional left. As Graeber argued, rather than being devoid of strategy, it can forge networks and ideas without having to be constrained by the institutional structures of party politics and the state (Graeber 2002). Indeed, in the era of globalisation, where the riddle of the nation-state and sovereignty has continued to burden political coherence, James Scott’s observations of the potential for imagination within anarchism become increasingly compelling (Scott, 2014). Yet, this imagination should be able to unlock potential obstacles with political strategy rather than dismiss them out of hand on the charge of statism (Prichard and Worth 2016).

## **BACK TO THE WAR OF POSITION**

Despite the charges of Day, I maintain that Gramsci remains more central to understanding the contemporary building of political opposition than he was for twentieth-century politics. Day’s claim that Gramsci’s working formula of hegemony was ultimately Leninist and tied to a statist strategy might be one that



should be taken seriously, but it is a crude and reductionist understanding of Gramsci (Day 2005). For Day, it was the very retention of hegemony as a working formula that remained the main problem with political socialism. As a concept that was developed during the Second International, the theory of hegemony emerged as the form of political society required to facilitate the building of socialism (Joseph 2002; Worth 2015). As such, it was developed by Lenin and then used by Gramsci to illustrate the complexities that exist within liberal democracy. Implicit within this was the belief that to build such a hegemonic society, a war of position was required across the spectrum of civil society in which the hearts and minds of the public could be won (Gramsci 1971).

The anarchist rejection of hegemony associated with Day extends to post-structuralism and to the notion of post-hegemony developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. As hegemony forms the original departure point, any attempt to 'move beyond' hegemony towards post-hegemony, to 'free' it from the shackles of class determinism suffers from the same problem. Day instead argues that convergence between the anarchist and socialist/Marxist traditions should come from the Owenite 'utopian' tradition alongside a distinct dismissal of the pursuit of hegemony (Day 2005). Yet, the whole premise of hegemony is one that is forged across civil society in a manner that is not structured by the rigid mechanisms of a state. Whilst Nicos Poulantzas was at pains to illustrate the invisible hand of the state to utilise hegemony as an instrumental form, the cultural and ideological engagements of Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams bring about an understanding of the fashioning of hegemony that remains crucial in understanding how a contemporary opposition can be built (Hall in Poulantzas 1980; Williams 2005). In addition, the development of Gramsci with the areas of global politics, and as a tool to understand globalisation and global society, provides us with a useful basis to understand the idea of a post-modern Prince which goes far beyond the dynamics of the Leninist mantle as depicted by Day (Gill 2000).

In order to understand how a potential opposition can emerge, the war of position remains central. If neoliberal capitalism can forge itself through national and regional variants and be articulated through a variety of contrasting socio-cultural forms that move beyond boundaries and the territorial realm of the sovereign state, then methods of contestation must be levied at the same levels. As such, post-neoliberal socialism cannot be developed merely within the realm of an individual party or state. Nor can it be built merely within a collection of political organisations or forms of political agency. A war of position must be forged across a wide number of fronts and must recognise that the nature of hegemony is one which is constantly shifting and reinventing itself to maintain its legitimacy (Hall

1986). Any form of contestation must keep up with these changing shifts and respond. In this sense, neither a form of left-national strategy led by traditional party mechanisms nor protest strategies geared around disruption can succeed on their own. Instead, for the character of neoliberal capitalism to be seriously challenged, a comprehensive collection of multi-dimensional forms of challenges needs to be forged that can delegitimise the common-sense of neoliberalism over time. For this to be realised, left convergence is not something that should be merely discussed but something that is essential.

Rather than dismissing hegemony and the war of position as being spatially confined to the state, there is a need to properly understand the process as one that not just transcends borders but takes on different socio-cultural dimensions in its expression of legitimacy. For example, a war of position would need to forge a series of counter/alternative hegemonic strategies that would operate alongside a transnational configuration of bodies capable of challenging its neoliberal legitimacy. This would be vital for any form of left-coherence to develop. This does not necessarily require solid policy commitments or a form of national co-ordination but a commitment towards establishing a transnational war of position on the very fabric of neoliberal capitalism. Again, this can easily be dismissed as both woolly and – in the light of the experience of the various forms of social forums that dominated the first decade of the century – a mere repetition of the same empty commitment towards envisioning the possibility of ‘another world’. Yet such a process is a long one. Gramsci’s own musings on this pointed to the long transformation of Europe during the rise of the bourgeois’ nation-state (Gramsci 1971, pp118-120). Thus, a war of position is a gradual one that must be geared at the national, sub-national and transnational level. As the sovereign nation-state has effectively been a hindrance in looking to contain the forces of neoliberalism, it is essential that any response does not look to re-establish national-first strategies as has been seen with some elements of popular sovereignty associated with *Lexit*. Instead, the tradition of transnational activism needs to be nurtured and built upon. Likewise, as the boundaries between space and information become ever increasingly blurred, the need to build a conscious alternative to neoliberalism through the utilisation of such networks become paramount. This can equally not be confined merely to protest politics, which remain the preserve of the small minority, but applied throughout the contrasting contours of civil society. As such, the need for a degree of continuity is necessary for the war of position to be developed at these various levels. The need for left convergence is perhaps even more important. Hegemony – not post-hegemony – remains the departure point for any viable opposition to neoliberalism and the wide understanding of the war

of position provides us avenues in which we can understand how an alternative challenge can be built – one that remains distinctly global in outlook. It should also be recognised that the various forms of protest politics and the politics of non-compliance epitomised through Scott’s ‘weapons of the weak’ (and associated with anarchism) have provided a key strategic basis for such a position and indeed one that moves beyond the nation-state in the manner that traditional readings of hegemony did not. It is from building from these – admittedly underdeveloped – foundations that the long process of the war of position must be forged.

## **CONCLUSION: TOWARDS TRANSNATIONALISM, AGAINST LEFT NATIONALISM**

The thirty-year post-cold war period has redefined the way that we see left oppositional agency. Arguments around the form opposition should take have seen a resurgence of anarchist thought, especially considering the emergence of mass protest that has accompanied the globalisation of the neoliberal epoch. Yet, the new political left has re-emerged more noticeably within the realm of the traditional political party. From the ‘pink tide’ in Latin America, through to the successes in Europe and North America of parties and figureheads, a new form of socialism appeared to be on the offensive at the political level. The recent halting of these moves has once again led to questions about the significant inroads these political responses can make to challenge the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism. In this piece, I have suggested that micro and disruptive strategies remain significant for building an alternative opposition and that Gramsci’s war of position, understood at a level capable of moving beyond the spatial confines of the nation-state, remains the best way of understanding how neoliberalism might be transformed.

As stated, the process of a war of position is a long one, and it is paramount that a return to the nation-state in the form of twentieth-century left-nationalism is avoided at all costs. For those who support left-nationalism, the main assumption is that whilst the nation-state is not the most ideal base for the construction of political opposition, it remains the only viable institutional option. As such, mutual solidarity around a collection of national sovereign left parties remains the only way of proceeding. This would also reject any form of transnational protest as meaningless. Yet, such an approach contains other significant problems. Firstly, one of the major advantages of neoliberal globalisation is that politics is still based upon the premise of national sovereignty. The failure to address this has meant that politically the forces of neoliberalism remain globally unchecked. Sovereignty is thus utilised in a manner that protects international capital but contains political opposition. This will only be reinforced by left nationalism. Secondly,

the main alternative to the idea of ‘globalism’ at present has come from the forces of right-wing populism. Left nationalism plays into this and as Rosa Luxemburg observed poignantly at the beginning of the twentieth century, the pursuit and defence of sovereignty at its holistic level seeks to create bourgeois divisions that only serves to divide a proletariat which requires a unity that transcends borders (Luxemburg, 1971). Thus, whilst debates can and indeed should be conducted on the type of strategy the left should take to neoliberal transformation, the main issue going forward is coherence: it must continue to forge a left-wing consciousness that moves beyond the realms of the state at a transnational level. This would also answer the question of where and how an opposition can emerge in a manner that compliments the critical analysis of neoliberalism that has come out of the academy in the last thirty years.

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## NOTES

- 1 For an overview of ‘real’ socialism see Cox (1991), ‘Real Socialism in Historical Perspective’, in R. Miliband and L. Panitch (eds), *Soviet Regimes: The Aftermath: Socialist Register* (London: Merlin), and for ‘state socialism’ see David Lane *The Rise and Fall of State Socialism* (Polity: Cambridge).
- 2 See for example the engagement of Gramsci by right-wing British politician Michael Gove, the utilisation of ‘post-truth’ through a perverse application of relativism (Wight, 2018) and the conscious use of the term hegemony from certain European right-wing politicians.
- 3 Again, I refer to the phrase ‘new’ to mean that they see the need to confront neoliberal economic globalisation as being at the heart of their campaign and do not believe that the old rubric of twentieth-century left-nationalism can merely be rolled out.

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