Capitalist Realism And Neoliberal Hegemony: A Dialogue

Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert

Abstract *This is a dialogue conducted over email by Mark Fisher, author of the widely-read* Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative *and Jeremy Gilbert, editor of* New Formations. *The discussion touches on issues raised by Fisher's book, by some of Gilbert's work as a theorist and analyst, by some of the political commentary in which each has engaged at various times (online and in print), as well as by the recent prevalence of a certain identification with anarchist ideas and methods amongst activists and online commentators whose intellectual and political reference points are otherwise very close to those of the Fisher and Gilbert. It considers the concept of 'capitalist realism' as a way of understanding neoliberal ideology and hegemony; the role of bureaucracy in neoliberal culture and the 'societies of control'; the types of political and cultural strategy that might be required to challenge their hegemonic position; the relationship between political strategies which do and do not focus on conventional party politics; the general condition of politics in the UK today. Although largely concerned with a specifically British (and, arguably, English) political context, its consideration of abstract issues around the theorisation of ideology and neoliberalism and the nature of political strategy have far wider applicability.*

Keywords capitalist realism, neoliberalism, capitalism, ideology, hegemony, bureaucracy, political strategy, democracy, activism, anarchism, neurotic individualism

This is a dialogue conducted over email by Mark Fisher, author of the widely-read *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* and Jeremy Gilbert, editor of *New Formations*. The discussion touches on issues raised by Fisher's book, by some of Gilbert's work as a theorist and analyst, by some of the political commentary in which each has engaged at various times (online and in print), as well as by the recent prevalence of a certain identification with anarchist ideas and methods amongst activists and online commentators whose intellectual and political reference points are otherwise very close to those of Fisher and Gilbert. It considers the concept of 'capitalist realism' as a way of understanding neoliberal ideology and hegemony; the role of bureaucracy in neoliberal culture and the 'societies of control'; the types of political and cultural strategy that might be required to challenge their hegemonic position; the relationship between political strategies which do and do not focus on conventional party politics; the general condition of politics in the UK today. Although largely concerned with a specifically British (and, arguably, English) political context, its consideration of abstract issues around the theorisation of ideology and neoliberalism and the nature of political strategy have far wider applicability.

JG: Your use of the term 'capitalist realism' seems to designate, at its simplest, both the conviction that there is no alternative to capitalism as a paradigm for social organisation, and the mechanisms which are used to disseminate and reproduce that conviction amongst large

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populations. As such it would seem to be both a 'structure of feeling', in Williams' terms (or perhaps an 'affective regime' in a slightly more contemporary register) and, in quite a classical sense, a hegemonic ideology, operating as all hegemonic ideologies do, to try to efface their own historicity and the contingency of the social arrangements which they legitimate. Is that right? Could you correct and/or expand on that explication of the term and say a little bit about its genesis and its specific implications?

MF: I don't think there's anything to correct in your description. I think, though, that we can say that capitalist realism has effaced not only its own historicity and contingency, but also its own existence as an ideological constellation. You could say that effacement is what defines capitalist realism. The hegemonic field which capitalist realism secures and intensifies is one in which politics itself has been 'disappeared'. What capitalist realism consolidates is the idea that we are in the era of the post-political - that the big ideological conflicts are over, and the issues that remain largely concern who is to administrate the new consensus. Of course, there's nothing more ideological than the idea that we've moved beyond ideology. It has become increasingly clear over the last few years, especially since 2008, that the (essentially 1990s) idea of the post-political and the post-ideological was always a cover for neoliberal hegemony. The increased use of the term neoliberalism since 2000 is a symptom of the weakening power of neoliberalism. The more it is named, the less its doctrines can pose as post-political.

Nevertheless, the notion of the post-political isn't just an ideological ruse. Membership of political parties and trade unions really is declining. It's a commonplace that the major political parties in the UK and the US are scarcely distinguishable from one another. Very few people identify themselves as political. Given this context, there's something misleading about describing capitalist realism, as I myself often tend to, as the belief that capitalism is the only viable political economic system. Capitalist realism could perhaps better be seen as a set of behaviours and affects that arise from this 'belief'. The dominance of capitalism, the inability to imagine an alternative to it, now constitute a sort of invisible horizon. Few explicitly think about 'capitalism' as such - the disappearance of alternatives, even if only imaginary alternatives, make it much harder to apprehend capitalism as a specific, contingent system. Capitalist realism as I have understood it entails this deep embedding in a world - or set of worlds - in which capitalism is massively naturalised.

Capitalist realism doesn't appear in the first instance, then, as a political position. It emerges instead as a pragmatic adjustment - 'this is the way thing are now'. This sense of resignation, of fatalism, is crucial to the 'realism'. Here we can distinguish between neoliberalism and capitalist realism. Capitalist realism isn't the direct endorsement of neoliberal doctrine; it's the idea that, whether we like it or not, the world is governed by neoliberal ideas, and that won't change. There's no point fighting the inevitable.

It's not an accident that I came to the idea of capitalist realism while working in a Further Education (FE) college at the height of Blairism. New Labour was the paradigmatic example of a formerly left-wing party capitulating to capitalist realism. For it must be recognised that capitalist realism is a pathology of the left. It is the left which has had to tell itself the story that there's no point struggling for an alternative to capitalism. In other words, capitalist realism is the left acquiescing in the narrative that the new right so aggressively pushed in the 1980s. Thatcher was right to claim Blair as her greatest achievement. Labour's painful

journey from unelectability in the 1980s to government in the 1990s ended up consummately proving Thatcher's point that there is no alternative. When Thatcher first made that remark, she was saying that there is no *viable* alternative to neoliberal capitalism. By 1997, there was no *imaginable* alternative.

In the Further Education sector where I worked, you could see the practical and existential consequences of all this. There was an acceptance amongst managers of the inevitability that education would increasingly be modelled on business. Some managers would typically introduce new procedures by explicitly saying that they didn't themselves think they were a good idea, but what could you do? This was how things were to be done now, and the easiest option all round would be for us to go through the motions. We didn't have to believe it, we only had to act as if we believed it. The idea that our 'inner beliefs' mattered more than what we were publicly professing at work was crucial to capitalist realism. We could have left-wing convictions, and a left-wing self-image, provided these didn't impinge on work in any significant way! This was ideology in the old Althusserian sense - we were required to use a certain language and engage in particular ritualised behaviours, but none of this mattered because we didn't 'really' believe in any of it. But of course the very privileging of 'inner' subjective states over the public was itself an ideological move.

Capitalist realism, then, is essentially about the depoliticisation of work and, more broadly, of everyday life. That's one of the saddest effects of the subduing of unions. At work, we learn to accept worsening pay and conditions as 'just the way things are' in a competitive, globalised world. 'Politics' becomes something that we engage in only at the ballot box, if we even consider that to be worthwhile (and many of those who vote think of it as a pointless, impotent act) or, if we're of a more activist bent, it's something that we do at protests of various kinds. In either case, work becomes decoupled from politics. (One benefit of the occupations that happened in educational institutions as part of the anti-fees movement in the UK in 2010 was that they remade the link between work and politics.)

In summary, then, I think it's best not to see capitalist realism as a political position but as something which precludes political involvement and identification. It therefore follows that one of the most effective first steps in the struggle against capitalist realism will be the invention of new ways in which people can become involved with politics.

JG: What do you see as the role of bureaucratic managerialism in the neoliberal regime?

MF: The - on the face of it - strange role that bureaucratic managerialism played in neoliberal culture was central to the formation of my thinking about capitalist realism. It became increasingly apparent to me that we were living out a cognitive dissonance. We'd internalised the idea that it was social democracy, socialism and Stalinism that were bureaucratic, and that neoliberalism was against red tape of all kinds. Yet workers, particularly workers in public services, found ourselves doing more bureaucracy than ever before. How can we make sense of this?

The first thing to say is that the nature of the bureaucracy has changed. Bureaucracy has become decentralized. It's not (just) something to which we are subject now; it's something which we are required to actively produce ourselves. In some respects, we're in a worst of all worlds scenario, in which the old, top down state bureaucratic apparatuses are supplemented by a regime of self-surveillance. We're all familiar with this regime - continuing professional

development, performance reviews, log books, not to mention the whole machine of the Research Excellence Framework (REF).[1] We're also familiar with the diffuse atmosphere of light cynicism which surrounds these activities. When I was working in FE, one manager would cheerily present us with each new initiative, openly saying that he didn't think it was of much value, but that we should do it to make our lives easier. He once told our team that we weren't sufficiently critical of ourselves in one of our performance reviews - but not to worry because nothing would happen on the basis of any criticisms that we made. I don't know what was more demoralising here: the fact that we were required to denigrate ourselves as part of our job, or the fact that the criticisms we made were a purely empty exercise. Some of the affective consequences of this self-surveillance regime are amply demonstrated here: anxiety, accompanied by a sense of the meaninglessness of the activity about which one is anxious. The word 'Kafkaesque' is enormously over-used, but it fits this existential situation perfectly. So, bureaucracy becomes immanent to the fabric of work in general, not something performed by a special kind of worker. This also means that what we might call bureaucratic time has changed. In line with Deleuze's highly prescient analyses in his essay 'Postscript on Societies of Control', there is a shift from the punctuated time of the periodic assessment to the more open time of the continuous assessment. The inspection never ends. As Deleuze says, drawing on a term from Kafka's *The Trial*, we are in a condition of indefinite postponement. Our status is never fully ratified; it is always up for review. The legalese vagueness of the criteria by which we are judged intensifies the sense of uncertainty: can we be sure have we interpreted the guidelines correctly?

Rather than an elimination of bureaucracy, what we've seen under neoliberalism is just the reverse: bureaucracy's mad, cancerous proliferation. Increasingly, what this new bureaucracy measures is not the worker's ability to perform their job, but their ability to perform bureaucratic tasks effectively. This has perverse effects on the way that institutions function, which we saw demonstrated with New Labour's 'target culture'. As is now well known, the imposition of targets led to widespread gaming of the system, and also a neglect of those areas which fell outside the remit of the target. I've called this situation 'Market Stalinism'. This isn't just a joke; what it highlights is the extent to which neoliberalism depends upon authoritarian bureaucratic control systems. Again, New Labour exemplified this perfectly. The party repudiated authoritarian Stalinism at the level of ideological content, but, at the level of form, Labour became an increasingly authoritarian organisation. The concept of Market Stalinism also allows us to recognise that neoliberalism was never about reducing governmental control in order to free up the market. Market dynamics don't spontaneously appear in public services, they have to be constructed – and, as the examples I've already given show, this requires, not a trimming back of bureaucratic agencies, but the production of new forms of bureaucracy. In order that institutions and workers can be seen to be competing with one another, it is necessary to produce all kinds of spurious quantificatory data. This means that, in education and other public services, we're not dealing with 'marketization' so much as a pseudo-marketization, the *simulation* of market dynamics.

The question then arises - if this neoliberal bureaucracy is (in its own 'official' terms) dysfunctional, if it doesn't work to achieve its stated goals, then, what is its real purpose? I think there are a number of answers to this. The first is that the Market Stalinist bureaucracy has an ideological effect. If, as Althusser said, ideology is essentially ritualistic - i.e. it makes us adopt

a certain language, range of behaviours etc. - then neoliberal bureaucracy is quintessentially ideological. It not only naturalises and normalises the language and practices of business; it makes the ritualised performance of this naturalisation a condition of workers retaining their jobs. The second role that managerialist bureaucracy plays for neoliberalism is a disciplinary function: it subdues and pacifies workers. The anxiety that neoliberal bureaucracy so often produces should not be seen as an accidental side-effect of these measures; rather, the anxiety is something that is in itself highly desirable from the perspective of the neoliberal project. The erosion of confidence, the sense of being alone, in competition with others: this weakens the worker's resolve, undermines their capacity for solidarity, and forestalls militancy.

So it seems to me that the politicizing of managerialist bureaucracy could be extremely fruitful from the point of view of the struggle against neoliberalism. There is a widespread discontent with managerialism, but, in the lack of any agent or organised struggle which can focus it, this discontent will remain impotent grumbling. This is just the kind of space that I was referring to in my first answer, when I was talking about the kinds of struggle which could reconnect politics to work and everyday life. For whatever reason, unions don't yet seem to have grasped the potential here. This is a catastrophic shame - the tendency of neoliberal bureaucracy is to individualise (with the threat that, if individuals refuse to co-operate with particular bureaucratic initiatives, they will lose their job). It can only be countered by the kind of collective action which unions ought to be able to organise.

JG: Your point about capitalist realism being legitimated by the idea that the interior conscience is the only true site of the authentic self seems quite crucial. I think one of the implications of a properly anti-individualist philosophy has to be at least a certain scepticism towards the assumption, inherited from the confessional tradition, from Romanticism and from depth psychology, that the interior life is the privileged site of authentic selfhood. That's hardly a new observation I know, but your point lends it a new kind of critical urgency I think. It's been clear for a long time that neoliberalism effectively offers us a bargain whereby we accept the lack of collective control over our physical or social environment in return for a very high level of personal autonomy outside the sphere of work: the logical correlate of that is to accept a mode of subjectivity which ultimately accords all value and intensity to an entirely private domain of personal consumption. But one further problem here is that many contemporary forms of labour are all about the production and reproduction of affects and relations…so to some extent there has to be an increasingly demarcated boundary, a sort of psychic *cordon sanitaire*, between this posited domain of interior authenticity, and the whole remainder of a subject's social, affective, relational and emotional life … I wonder if what we're talking about here is something like the logic of Oedipalisation as described by Deleuze and Guattari (D&G) … which is rather different from the classical psychoanalytic understanding of Oedipus as simply a function of all possible civilisation. Of course Zizek tries to tackle this complex of issues a bit in his interesting essay 'Whither Oedipus?' from a few years ago, but he's still, I think, coming from a perspective that doesn't quite grasp D&G's point that the experience of desire-as-lack, which is partly dependent upon the demarcation of the interiority of the subject (where lack is experienced as the truth of our experience) from the rest of existence, is actively *produced* by capitalism rather than simply being given a particular meaning by it. Any thoughts on this?

MF: This set of issues seems to me to represent a major tension in capitalist culture at the moment. On the one hand, as you say, it is increasingly difficult to separate life from work. In conditions of mandatory entrepreneurialism, where we are continually enjoined to sell ourselves, it is in one sense almost impossible to set up the *cordon sanitaire* to which you refer. This isn't only a matter of duties extending beyond the workplace - via email and the like - it is also because it is our own subjectivity that is for sale. It's not enough to just do our jobs; we have to be seen wanting to do them. What we do in our 'spare time' becomes an asset we can market at work, while activities that are ostensibly beyond work, such as updating our Facebook profiles, are work in the sense that they create value - but we are not remunerated for this value-creation.

Seen from another angle, that kind of *cordon sanitaire*, far from being impossible to maintain, loooks like a condition of work now. It's what characterises alienation in the classic sense. We acquiesce at work because work and 'what we really are' have to remain separate.

We live in a new age of Oedipus. It seems to me that the basic Deleuze and Guattari story - that capitalism actively produces neurotic individualism, that Oedipus is the reterritorialized face of a capitalism that is, at its other pole, increasingly abstract, impersonal, 'dehumanised' - has been strongly confirmed by recent political and cultural developments.

Since around the turn of the millennium, there's been a shift in culture towards a neurotic individualism. On social networks, we become anxious curators of our own identities. With reality TV such as *Big Brother*, television talent shows and business-based TV programmes such as *The Apprentice* and *Dragon's Den*, there's been a strong emphasis on individuals competing with one another, and an exploitation of the affective and supposedly 'inner' aspects of the participants' lives. This is another dimension of capitalist realism. It's no accident that 'reality' became the dominant mode of entertainment in the last decade or so. The 'reality' usually amounts to individuals struggling against one another, in conditions where competition is artificially imposed, and collaboration is actively repressed.

Now let me ask you some questions.

MF: It's hard not to have some sympathy for the anarchist critique of parliamentary politics at the moment. How can we counter this - what reasons are there to be in any way optimistic about change coming through parliament?

JG: Well firstly let's acknowledge the validity of the first part of your opening remark. It's hard not to have sympathy for a highly reductive critique of parliamentary politics - which would see it as effectively useless from a progressive, radical or democratic perspective - because representative politics across Europe, North America, Australasia, and even in South Africa, seems to have been able to deliver very little beyond various degrees of accommodation to the demands of neoliberalism for several decades now, despite the widespread unpopularity of that programme in most instances. That's the most immediately visible fact about the relationship between formal representative politics and any set of - even quite minimally - egalitarian political objectives in recent years. If we think that there's any point in getting involved with representative politics at all - and I think we both do - then initially it's up to us to respond to that observation by explaining why.

The first thing I would say is that, when thinking about this kind of question, we always have

to look at actual history. What has and hasn't been achieved in the past by whatever means, that might lead us to expect certain outcomes from certain types of action in the future? On this basis it's very clear that the history of anything we could really designate as 'anarchist' politics has delivered almost nothing, or at least nothing on its own, in terms of achieving either revolutionary or reformist objectives in any sustained way, despite having been around since the 1860s at the latest. Despite the habitually self-congratulatory tone of, for example, self-styled 'anarchists' around the Occupy movement (which I think has been very important, but not because it has actually achieved anything) anyone who wants to claim that it did have any such success has to refer to the existence of a few Spanish communes during the civil war that managed to last for a matter of months each.

On the other hand, the at least partial success of parliamentary reformism is pretty palpable. I mean, in very crude terms, if you look back to the early twentieth century, and you look at the places were anarchism and revolutionary communism were strongest - Eastern and Southern Europe - and then you look at the countries of Northern and Western Europe, then on one level you have to say that the forms of social democracy that emerged in the latter context have proven ultimately more effective at protecting workers from exploitation than anarchism and communism in the former. Wages are higher, working hours are shorter, inequality is less, in countries with strong welfare states than in countries that were once soviet republics or hotbeds of anarchism; so everything I'm saying here goes very much for people who want to launch a revival of 'communism' as well. This isn't to say that the anarchist and indeed the soviet critique of both the state and traditional modes of left organisation are without validity, but it is a point worth keeping in mind.

And in terms of how we counter a naive ahistorical anarchism: to be honest I think the single most important thing we can do is to study both the recent and longer term history of radical politics and to encourage others to do the same. The worst problem which afflicts activist culture, at least in the UK, is the fact that young political activists generally know almost nothing about their immediate antecedents or about the broader political history of institutions like the Labour Party. The phrase you hear from such people all the time is 'party politics never changes anything' - but at best this assertion is normally based on disappointment with the Blair government (which did, in fact, enact a series of significant reforms such as the minimum wage, subsidised childcare, improved maternity and paternity rights, etc. which it's very clear the kind of vicious anti-welfare neoliberalism being embraced by the Conservatives would never have tolerated); at worst it's just an article of faith based on no evidence at all. Invariably, in my experience, such activists either know or remember nothing about the recent past of extra-parliamentary radicalism, and how little it has achieved (or what it has achieved when it has achieved anything). I think the most effective way to combat this kind of ignorance would be to start trying to consolidate and publicise the history of radical politics in the UK and elsewhere over recent decades. That would be the way to combat the kind of naive anarchism - a manifestation of what I've called before 'the activist imaginary' - that I think you're referring to.

Having said this I think I would want to differentiate somewhat between a very vulgar anarchist critique of parliamentary democracy - which thinks that you should simply oppose and/or ignore it *in toto* - and the kind of critique that we might associate more with the Marxist tradition, and even what we might call the left wing of social democracy (and I'm sure lots of

self-professed 'anarchists' would endorse this more complex view as well).

The latter view would tend to stress the need to use the mechanisms and institutions of the existing state in order both to achieve immediate social reforms but also to create and potentiate new forms of collective power, without falling for what I've called before (I'm sure I wasn't the first) 'the Fabian fantasy' - the belief that government is simply a neutral instrument that can be used by any political group to implement any agenda. I would have to say that I think that this myth is just as dangerous as the anarchistic belief that you can simply ignore or destroy those institutions. You can't just ignore or destroy them, but you can't simply occupy them while making no attempt to transform and ultimately supplant them, and expect to achieve progressive ends, other than very short-term ones. In my experience most Labour MPs seem to be completely deluded on this point. They might recognise that New Labour got captured by neoliberalism, but they think that this happened basically because Tony Blair was persuaded by Andrew Adonis that neoliberalism was a good idea or because Gordon Brown didn't have the guts to stand up to Murdoch. They have no idea that there might be real structural impediments to using the existing institutions of the British state to do anything other than implement the interests of finance capital. They really believe that all they have to do to pursue a different agenda is to achieve ministerial office and maintain good intent, and somehow they will be able to administer social justice from Whitehall. At best they tend to think that you need to get more people 'involved' in politics, but this basically translates as attending local party meetings and participating in local campaigns around discrete issues, rather than making any substantial reform of democratic procedures and institutions themselves. In fact I think that to a large extent the popularity of a simplistic anarchism amongst activists connected with projects like Occupy is as much as anything a mirror-image of this kind of idiotic parliamentarism, which is reproduced most uncritically not by parliamentarians themselves, but by the whole profession of political journalists and professional commentators. It's worth stressing here actually that I've spoken to a number of very bright MPs who don't hold this naive view, but I think I've met even fewer professional journalists in recent years who don't.

I don't make this analysis on the basis of a theoretical position but merely on the basis of an objective consideration of the relevant history. How have political goals which effectively redistributed both wealth and power actually been achieved in the past? If you look at something like the National Health Service - it wasn't built by anarchists and revolutionaries, but it also didn't come about just because some well-meaning mandarins and ministers decided it would be a good idea (which is what your average well-meaning Oxford PPE graduate has been taught and sincerely believes). It was only an assemblage including a very well-organised labour movement - including both the trade unions and the democratic socialist wing of the Labour party led by Nye Bevan - and a certain kind of technocratic modernising tendency within the parliamentary Labour Party and even sections of the Civil Service - that made such lastingly significant reforms possible.

So the short answer to your question is that history suggests that radical and democratic politics won't get anywhere if it doesn't engage with mainstream party politics. More theoretically we could say that if we accept the basic Gramscian (and by no means only Gramscian) proposition that political change can only really be brought about by broad-based social coalitions, then it's pretty clear that right now in a country like the UK, the only organisations with anything like the necessary resources to begin to make such a thing possible

are the trade unions and the Labour Party, which is why it remains the case that you can't win any serious progressive objectives without winning the argument inside Labour.

But having said all this one can equally say that another condition of possibility for political progress under these circumstances is for the leaderships of such organisations to accept their own limited capacities and the need to build up new centres of collective and democratic power. It's this that I think should actually form the core demand of the Left in relation to, for example, the Labour leadership in the UK: they don't need to have a programme for implementing radical social reform, until political conditions exist which might make a genuinely progressive project actually viable, but they at least need to have a programme aimed at trying to make such reforms politically possible in the future. I think a lot of left criticism of New Labour was very confused on this point - a lot of it was framed in terms that seemed to imply that after 18 years of Thatcherism, the demolition of the unions, the complete corporate take-over of the media, the evisceration of local government etc. it would have been possible simply to resume the post-war social democratic project, or some updated, more libertarian version thereof. That would never have been viable. But a Labour government coming to power under such circumstances *could* have implemented a programme aimed at reversing each of those trends: rebuilding local government, sponsoring the development of an alternative media sector, reinvigorating the unions. Yet they did nothing of the kind, and that's what they should have been attacked for, repeatedly and relentlessly. To answer your second question then - there is no hope of change coming through parliament alone, just as there is no hope of it coming through mechanisms which don't involve parliament at all. Radicals should engage with parliamentary politics precisely to try to ensure that time and opportunities are not wasted pursuing either of these sterile options, as well as trying to ensure that however useless the next Labour government is, pressure can be brought to bear on it take those measures that it realistically could take in order to transform the broader strategic situation.

MF: Yes, there's a sleight of hand in many anarchist lines of argument. The reformist, social democratic left is judged by what it has actually done, whereas anarchism is judged by what it would do, in some ideal society. Setting things up like this obscures what the parliamentary left actually achieved, while distracting us from anarchism's meagre achievements. There's an anarchist fatalism which is the other side of capitalist realism. According to this logic, both parliament and mainstream media are irredeemably corrupt, and we should totally disengage from them. This is given extra force by the appeal to networks and new technology, which allegedly make the mainstream media (or MSM) and the state irrelevant. I think these arguments should be rejected *tout court*. The first problem is that this view of politics and media isn't making a break from the currently dominant hegemonic position; it only echoes it. Franco Berardi said of Berlusconi that he is the clown who mocks the place of power while occupying it. We might say something similar about Boris Johnson. Johnson profits from the atmosphere of cynicism that settled over politics. His personal appeal derives in large part from his seeming distance from the earnestness of party politics. Yet this distance doesn't stop Johnson occupying a position of power. That leads to my second problem with the disdain for mainstream politics and media. Elements of the left seem to earnestly believe what they say about the irrelevance of the state. The neoliberal right has been much more pragmatic. It might have relentlessly propagandised against the state, but it also made sure that it controlled the

state. (Of course, in practice neoliberalism was only ever opposed to certain state functions, such as social security, spending on public services etc.) The point is - if we withdraw from the state and the media, this doesn't mean that the state and the media will cease to have any power. It just means that we will cease to have any influence over the shape that power takes. The problem is that these critiques essentialize both media and party politics. We need to remember that neither of these spaces is fixed for all time; that they are terrains shaped by struggles. Anarchist fatalism maintains that a leftwing Labour Party is impossible – what a contrast with the ambition and can-do spirit of the neoliberals who took over the Labour Party. If only they had been so fatalistic!

All of this is meant to echo your point. It's not that only activity within mainstream media or party politics counts. On the contrary, these terrains will only change when they are put under pressure from outside. But that pressure must be exerted; and producing 'radical' networks that see their function as bypassing MSM and parliament will only allow the right to retain control of the so-called centre ground. One of the major problems with New Labour was that it never moved past stage 1 of a project for hegemonic takeover. It won power, but then – after introducing the measures that you mentioned, such as minimum wage, subsidised childcare etc. which are by no means insignificant – it became stuck on a Sisyphean wheel, where the only goal was winning re-election. Blair likes to chide 'Old Labour' for being stuck in the past, but he never really moved beyond 1996 – with power close enough to be touched, but extreme caution necessary to ensure that it was won. The contrast with the Thatcher government, or indeed the current coalition, is as striking as it is painful. Thatcher succeeded in changing the definition of the centre ground, but, after more than a decade of New Labour government, the centre remained more or less where Thatcher had left it. This failure to re-define the centre meant that, when the coalition came in, it could immediately drag everything to the right.

So let me ask a further question.

MF: What strategies can we pursue to break neoliberal hegemony?

JG: Strategically any kind of hegemonic or counter-hegemonic intervention is always about the co-ordination of interests. Exactly what form that co-ordination has to take is dependent upon the circumstances. Given that the old form of the highly uniform and relatively monolithic political party - Gramsci's 'modern Prince' - is clearly unlikely to return to efficacy any time soon, I think it's necessary to keep thinking about how the very divergent elements of an assemblage which could challenge neoliberal hegemony might work together, or at least towards mutually-supportive goals. In the context of a very diverse and fragmented culture, we can't expect any one organisation or leadership to do all or even most of the necessary work. On the other hand, given the general depoliticisation of the culture which you've referred to, it's hard to imagine this happening at all without there being a viable alternative and the will to work for it coming from a visible section of the political class. To put it crudely, without a degree of explicit sympathy for a populist anti-neoliberal position being expressed by the political leaderships of the mainstream Left, we're not likely to get very far. At the same time, I take it to be the main point of your first question that it's important for radicals to recognise that unless they themselves form constituencies to whom politicians on the mainstream Left might realistically look for support in the pursuit of such a project, then those politicians are

never going to have the courage to express such sympathy.

In more substantive terms I would say that any successful strategy against neoliberalism will have to possess several key characteristics. Firstly, it has to set itself - philosophically, aesthetically, and politically - in opposition to the competitive individualist ideology which is the core of neoliberalism and its basis presuppositions (what Macpherson called 'the political theory of possessive individualism'). Secondly it has to avoid the trap of doing this simply by invoking a conservative communitarianism, be it nationalist, localist or religious in character. This is the terrible mistake being made by the current Labour leadership in the UK: trying to respond to neoliberalism with an explicitly conservative appeal to 'faith, flag and family' (in the words of 'Blue Labour' guru Maurice Glasman), conceiving these as the very entities which must be defended from the depredations of neoliberal capitalism and which only the state - or a completely undefined 'community - can protect.

The problem with this approach isn't just that it's obnoxious. It also won't work. It promises something that simply can't be delivered: a return to some unspecified, pre-neoliberal past. And above all, it makes the catastrophic mistake of adopting a purely negative attitude to the main vectors of current social change. Any successful strategy against neoliberalism surely has to try find ways to connect with those aspects and elements of such change which might be articulated to a democratic project: for example the popularity of social networking could surely be channelled into something more potent than the generation of commodifiable market data. But for this to happen would require political leaders actually to take an interest in the general project of radicalising democracy, creating new types of democratic institution which are more participatory and accountable than parliamentary institutions (as is happening today in Latin America), and this would require them to accept that the inherited institutions of parliamentary government are ultimately limited in their usefulness in the 21st century. This is a huge gulf to cross and in this country at least I'm afraid we're still nowhere close to it; but given how obvious this truth it is to the rest of the populace, it may be surprisingly easy to convince a few enterprising MPs and trade union leaders to take this line. Maybe. Probably not though.

MF: Yes. Part of the problem with the Blue Labour position is that isn't the break from the current hegemonic field that it presents itself as. 'Community' is often posited as the alternative to neoliberalism, but in actuality it has functioned as part of the same political imaginary, in which we are offered an alternative between radically isolated individuals and homogeneous, stable, communities. This pseudo-opposition is the one that Thatcherism installed. Blue Labour doesn't challenge the racism that Thatcherism required as a supplement to neoliberal economics, it further embeds it. Actually existing neoliberalism has always depended upon a commitment to traditionalism. Faith, flag and family, after all, are values that Thatcher fully supported. Reagan and Thatcher's success, in fact, was largely a consequence of their capacity to square the circle, and achieve a kind of rainbow coalition of the right, which could bring together economic liberals with the religious right. We've talked a great deal about the problems of the left, but it's worth remembering that, the parliamentary right has a very serious crisis of its own. Look at the Republicans' catastrophic campaign in the last US election, and the very tepid support that David Cameron managed to drum up at a time of deep unpopularity for Labour. The fix Cameron is in – trying to 'modernise' a party whose core support is reactionary

– shows that the old Thatcherite formula of neoliberal economics plus social conservatism and authoritarian populism won't work anymore. It is the advances that the left has actually made during the period of neoliberal domination - the bringing into the mainstream of anti-sexist, anti-racist and anti-homophobic agendas - which have contributed to the crisis of the right.

JG: Good point.

MF: Blue Labour is cynical and fatalistic; it believes that racism is inevitable, especially among the working class, and its whole strategy is geared up to appealing to that racism, while dressing it up as 'community'. But there's a reason that *National* Socialism has a bad name! And there's a popular cosmopolitanism which has practically no-one in parliament speaking for it. We saw this cosmopolitanism celebrated in the Olympic opening ceremony and in the Olympics themselves last year. When Tories started grumbling about 'lefty multiculturalism', they not only came off as a racist, but out of touch. The appeal to community almost always has an anti-modern as well as an openly racist dimension to it. The left needs to argue for a model of collectivity which doesn't depend on a backward-looking and insular notion of community.

JG: I agree entirely. Having said all this about what should happen at the level of political leadership, however, I think it's also necessary to think about what would have to happen at the 'molecular' level (as Deleuze and Guattari, but also Gramsci - who uses the word 'molecular' several times in the *Prison Notebooks*, to mean much the same thing as D&G - would put it). To really make a political challenge to neoliberalism viable, we would need to see some significant cultural upswell of radically democratic, libertarian yet anti-individualist sentiment. I'm afraid it's very hard to see any sign of this right now - even in the rather banal form of something like the rave culture of our youth. The older I get, the longer I live with neoliberalism and the challenges it poses, particularly now trying to raise a family, the more convinced I become that we can't really get anywhere without a resurgence of something that would look in many ways like the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, (and I include in this category the most daring strands of the feminist movement, for all that they themselves were reacting against the implicit misogyny of sections of the New Lefts and Rock culture in the 1960s). Unless there's a real movement to try to put into question - from an egalitarian, libertarian, anti-individualist perspective - the basic social forms of the household, the school, etc., and the core aesthetic presuppositions of liberal capitalist culture (for example the obsession with the individual, the private and the competitive which is the basis for celebrity culture, for the dominance of TV by 'reality' formats, and for the depressing centrality of columnists and opinion-journalists even to middle-brow media output) - it's hard to imagine anything but the most timid political reforms becoming viable. This isn't something we can plan for, legislate for, or even strategise for; but we might at least try to arrive at a situation wherein the leaders of the labour movement are not so completely unable to connect with the radical energy of such a movement once it emerges - or even threatens to emerge - as they were at every previous moment of opportunity from the end of the 1960s, when Jim Callaghan's rejected 'the permissive society', right up to the 1990s, when the movement didn't have a clue what to do with the constituencies who had been radicalised by rave and *Reclaim the Streets*.

What might actually make any of this possible? Well - on the cultural, 'molecular' side, I think this is pretty well impossible to answer. We'll know when it happens, I hope. It's partly the job of cultural theorists like us to keep looking out for such possibilities and to try to persuade key sections of the political class not to be terrified of them if and when they start to emerge. I think one very interesting kind of intervention would be to make some effort to reclaim the festival form - which for decades was the key cultural form of the counterculture and its legatees - from the wholly sanitised and corporate state it's now in (there was an interesting discussion about this on the Open Democracy website last year): maybe we need something like a British Burning Man. Maybe Burning Man is itself part of the problem, given its general ethic of antipoliticality. I'm not sure.

On the 'molar' side of political leadership I think there are good things that can be done very deliberately. In Britain, the organisation *Compass* is doing great work in trying to bring together people on a spectrum of opinion that runs from radical Greens to mainstream Labour members and even Liberal Democrats in the 'social liberal' tradition. In concrete tactical terms that work probably needs to include some deliberate efforts to think about recruiting and training future political leaders, because one of the problems that we are faced with very acutely at the present time is the consequences of the narrowing and hyper-professionalisation of the Labour party's young activist base at the end of the 80s: from that moment on, for a very long time, becoming a Labour MP just wasn't an appealing prospect for anyone who wasn't a ruthless careerist or a political geek (and the latter types tends to have no real affective instinct for shifting popular moods and their political potentialities, even if they might have a very sincere commitment to some abstract notion of social justice). That might have already changed - but we would need to make sure that it had before having any real prospect of an effective political alternative to neoliberalism crystallising in the UK. I'm not sure how these observations would translate into other national contexts, but I'm sure there are parallels as well as significant differences with what's happening in many other countries.

Notes

1. The Research Excellence Framework, within which British university departments are subject to a cycle of regular assessments of the quality of their research output, occurring at roughly 5-6 year intervals, the results of which heavily determine the level of research funding that they will receive in coming years. While its predecessor, the 'Research Assessment Exercise', was originally conceived, in the dying days of Thatcherism, on a wholly 'open-competition' model, elite universities have increasingly lobbied government to introduce mechanisms intended deliberately to skew the distribution of research funds resulting from the exercise in their favour.