Alliances, fronts, parties and populism

Kevin Morgan, Marina Prentoulis, Sirio Canós and Jeremy Gilbert

October 2016 was the eightieth anniversary of the Battle of Cable Street, and as part of the commemorations Soundings *organised a seminar to discuss how reflecting on popular front politics can help us think about contemporary issues such as populism and how we make alliances. The contributions below are based on the talks at the seminar.**

Why remember Cable Street?
Kevin Morgan

Unlike Paris, London has never really been a city of barricades. Even into our own times, it has generally been the forces of the state that have put up physical barriers - to keep our demonstrations on licensed, non-threatening routes, or use the monopoly of legalised violence to prevent us moving at all. The reason we remember Cable Street is therefore obvious. Not only was it one of the biggest barricades in the history of radical movements; it was also one which - far from relying on an activist minority swelling out to the breadth of the street by means of an abandoned lorry or tram - was made up of the tens and even hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, who blocked the incursions of the fascists by sheer force of numbers. They did so, moreover, under a rallying cry of the utmost simplicity - 'They shall not pass': the basic categories of them and us were defined with a visceral immediacy that meant that diverse political ideals and identities became crystallised together in the defence of a physical space. But, at the same time, the slogan - like the clenched fist salutes - through its radical populist discourse linked the local with the national and the international, and in particular with the popular struggle in Spain, from which the slogan had originated. It is

impossible to remember Cable Street without also remembering Spain, whose struggle against Franco became the focus of arguably the greatest international mobilisation of the twentieth century. If today we need to reflect on the challenges and possibilities of a left-wing populism, there can, in Britain at least, be no better occasion on which to do so than this anniversary.

Behind the crowds that blocked the way to Mosley's fascists, one can perhaps identify three key ingredients - narrative, organisation and the will to believe. In the space allowed me here, I want to offer brief reflections on each in turn as a contribution to the current debate around left-wing populism.

As to the first of these, the ceding to the right of the entire Brexit debate shows what happens to the left when it doesn't have a narrative. Between project fear and taking back control, it was difficult in much of the country to make out any clear alternative rising above the unbelievable insularity of the debate.

From this perspective, the anti-fascism of the 1930s-40s presents us with possibly the most compelling populist narrative in the history of the European left. Historians have written a lot about Cable Street, and some have suggested that its significance has been mythologised. In my view, this misses the crucial point that there wasn't only one battle of Cable Street, there were two. Beyond the physical confrontation itself, there was also the battle to represent the basic, defining, conflict of the day as that between fascism and the forces that could be mobilised against it, and thus drawn into activity for the wider social goals so obviously threatened by fascism. From this perspective, Cable Street was a great symbolic action whose power lay in its representation of fascism and anti-fascism as such clearly opposed alternatives that you couldn't avoid taking sides - and of the issue as being of such urgency that you couldn't avoid acting once you had taken a side. Not just Cable Street but anti-fascism itself thus had the power of the kind of social myth that the syndicalist Georges Sorel described as enclosing within it 'all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party or of a class', and as giving 'an aspect of complete reality to the hopes of immediate action by which … men can reform their desires, passions, and mental activity'. This was the logic of the famous pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War*; and it was this logic that, sixty years later, meant that Eric Hobsbawm could describe the war in Spain as the one cause which, despite everything that had come out since, still appeared to him to be as 'pure and compelling' as it did at the time.

For a historian such as Francois Furet - who, unlike Hobsbawm, had broken with communism in 1956 - anti-fascism was a central generator of what he saw as the communist illusion in the West. The discourse of anti-fascism had allowed communist parties to generalise their appeal and galvanise a wider liberal public around the idea of a single common object which transcended every other issue, including the darker aspects of communism itself. (The obvious contrast here would be with the cold war years, when that other great social myth, totalitarianism, was deployed to isolate the communists themselves, on grounds that Furet had latterly found far more congenial.)

If anybody ever had a genius for the generation of social myth it was Willi Münzenberg, a leading German communist and propagandist during the Weimar era, and one who, in recent historical debates, has attracted both hostile and sympathetic interest in about equal measure. Münzenberg embraced the widest range of modern media and campaigning methods to mobilise international opinion around issues of workers' solidarity, anti-imperialism and the achievements of Soviet Russia. Always his preference was for working through broader movements; always the logic was that of taking sides; and, after Hitler's installation in power in Germany, anti-fascism became the key to the mobilisation of a wider international public than communists had ever reached before. It was Münzenberg, for example, who organised a counter-trial in London when the Nazis accused the communists of burning down the Reichstag. Münzenberg was also the instigator of the famous Brown Book that documented the Hitler Terror in the first months of his regime, and this helped shaped the terms of political debate so that actions like Cable Street became not only possible but a matter of seeming necessity. Hostile accounts have questioned the reliability of some of the testimonies Münzenberg collected in indicting fascism, but in my view these completely miss the point: Münzenberg's aim was an anti-fascist *J'Accuse* in the form of documentary, which, though obviously constrained in its sources of data, was committed to the basic underlying truths of anti-fascism. These were the terms on which he would (rightly) have had the whole enterprise judged.

As Münzenberg would have been the first to tell you, narrative could only be made effective through the second key element under discussion here - organisation. This was both the precondition of an action like Cable Street and the surest means of consolidating the moment into more durable forms of contestation. And in

this period - as exemplified by Münzenberg - organisation meant communist organisation and the disciplined vehicle of the party.

This was partly a matter of resources, and if Münzenberg remains a figure of controversy it is partly because his so-called propaganda empire depended on material resources that ultimately derived from the Soviet state. (And there were other, more generic, features of the Leninist party which one might think twice about before seeking any recovery for our own times.)

Perhaps the more lasting significance of political organisation lay in the mass of less spectacular actions that finally ensured that the battle of Cable Street was actually won. Phil Piratin, in his book *Our Flag Stays Red*, describes how, after the confrontation, everyone in Stepney seemed to stand a head taller and draw strength from the successful demonstration of defiance. Nevertheless, Mosley's British Union of Fascists were not vanquished overnight: they continued to make more insidious incursions, not least through the harnessing to the fascist case of genuine grievances over housing and social conditions. The set-piece mise-en-scène of Cable Street stands out in the collective memory of the left, but it may in this respect detract from the more prosaic campaigning activities that Piratin described so well in his book, and which played such a major part in his election as the area's MP in 1945.

It was through challenging conservative and xenophobic narratives on issues of immediate concern that the 'them' and 'us' of populism was reconfigured in ways that underpinned the wider advances of the left. The key thing in the end was not just that 'they' shouldn't pass, but that it was not preordained that we should identify with 'them' - the people who treated others in this way. The advantage of party in this respect was that it not only represented a continuous political presence, but it was one that could potentially overcome the various barriers of social and geographical positioning. The effectiveness of Cable Street was that it combined the grassroots activism of the East End with a cross-class mobilisation from across and beyond London through the connecting networks of the parties of the left. It is because of the physical proximity within the city of 'them' and 'us' that London has always lent itself more easily to these forms of association. If the left-behind millions of the depressed areas had wanted to register their existence in the same way, they had, literally, to put on their stoutest footwear and hunger-march their way down to the capital. Among the younger middle-class

leftists who rallied to the cause at Cable Street, there were certainly some who had been radicalised two years earlier as the hunger marchers had passed through Cambridge.

Socially and geographically, party was in this sense a connecting force; it was never properly homogenised, but did have something of the character of a cross-class alliance. Indeed, when Mosley had attempted his first incursions into the depressed areas two years earlier, it was the same forces that had taken the lead in repulsing them - just as they had also sought to repulse their fascist counterparts in countries like France, Spain and Belgium. In Britain, moreover, they largely succeeded, and it is a measure of our current predicament that in recent years the far right has made electoral gains where Mosley never could.

It is obviously impossible to separate the decline of the party from the attenuation of the broader labour movement with which it was linked, and from the wilful neglect or destruction of the kinds of work- and community-based association in which these cultures of solidarity - with all their limitations - were embedded. As the Corbyn phenomenon has shown, however, ours can no longer be dismissed as simply an age of apathy. And yet there can never perhaps have been quite as stark a divide as the Brexit vote revealed - unless it were that between the glittering showpieces of Weimar culture and the darker hinterland of an unreconstructed Germany. In parts of Britain not far from Cable Street, whole lives can be lived without ever knowingly encountering a Brexit supporter; apart, that is, from the occasions that require the sharing of one's private space with a member of the submerged class of service workers - as when the proverbial taxi-driver or white-van man are needed for an early flight or a leaking pipe.

The third and most troubling feature of the communist party of the 1930s was the will to believe in its authority, and in the myths and delusions on which this depended, and the disciplined collective action that arose from this. For the latter, of course, one cannot help but have a hankering. If the left was virtually disregarded in the whole Brexit debate, not least among the contributory factors was that fact that it was so obviously divided over the issue. At the TUC's annual Tolpuddle Festival in summer 2016, the aura of goodwill that in such a setting still surrounded Corbyn - and the sustaining conviction that unity is strength - seemed largely to depend on nobody mentioning the issue by which the rest of the country was most sorely exercised.

In place of the current disabling sense of uncertainty and constraint, one could almost have yearned - like Jodi Dean - for a return to the age of the directing party. At least that way, had we suppressed our misgivings in uniting on one side or the other, we might have had some part in shaping the outcome, rather than leaving it to Osborne, Johnson and Farage.

Only 'almost', though. The idea of the directing party is not without difficulty.

We can all recognise that we cannot think of the crowds in the East End of London without also remembering the mobilisations taking place for the defence of Madrid. What we do sometimes forget, however, is that we can't remember the crowds in London, Paris and Madrid without also remembering those other crowds simultaneously gathering in Moscow to bay for the blood of the so-called fascist traitors. Nor, sadly, can you recall the legend of Willi Münzenberg without remembering that in the end he was anathematised by his own party, still within the same partisan logic of anti-fascism, and was murdered in 1940, most likely at the hands of 'us' rather than 'them'. There is always a potential tension between the logic of collective action and the safeguarding of independent critical judgment. Perhaps we should link these popular front and anti-fascist anniversaries with those of the Moscow show trials, and of the new them and us revealed in Hungary twenty years later, in order to remind ourselves of the potentially disastrous consequences of getting the balance wrong.

I therefore close by posing three key questions that remembering Cable Street suggests to me. The first is the question of whether we can find ways to shape a narrative of taking sides, for example over the issue of austerity, that can be generalised across social and national boundaries in such ways that the left, both nationally and internationally, can speak and be heard with a common voice. The second is the question of the political agencies through which these narratives can be constructed, and of what, if anything, now takes the place that at the time of Cable Street was the place of party. The third - given that there is so much in the record of left- and right-wing populism that one would never wish to emulate - is how to make possible a form of counter-populism that doesn't involve costs that (as in the case of the left-wing populism that was stalinism) are in some respects scarcely less disastrous than those of fascism itself. But it is not only for reasons of space that I pose these questions without necessarily being able to answer them.

What kind of alliances?
Marina Prentoulis

The civil war in Spain often features in arguments on the left about alliances and popular fronts. In Spain, the Popular Front was formed in 1936 as an electoral pact, with different elements coming together to contest that year's general elections after the collapse of the previous short-lived right-wing coalition government. The alliance brought together the Socialist Party (PSOE), the Communist Party and POUM (a left workers' party), as well as liberal republicans, anarchists and workers' unions, and it succeeded in defeating the National Front in the election and forming a government. But Spain at that time had only been a republic since 1931, and it was deeply divided between the modernising liberals and leftists of the coalition and the very traditional conservatives, backed by the catholic church, land-owners and army, who were not happy with the democratic reforms made by the first republican government. Once they had lost the elections, the Nationalist Right therefore switched to a strategy of military force and marched against the government. The aim of the popular front had been to unite all the democrats against the forces of reaction and fascism but it was ultimately unsuccessful in defending the Republic, and the final defeat of the elected government in 1939 was seen as a major victory for the cause of fascism in Europe.

The criticism made by Trotsky of the communists in Spain was that by forming alliances with bourgeois forces they had betrayed the revolution. For Trotsky and successive generations of Trotskyists, it is always problematic when you participate with non-revolutionary forces in an alliance: it will always be a betrayal of the working-class struggle, and any alliance, even with the radical bourgeoisie, will have the same effect. If you are not going against capitalism you will betray the workers. For Trotsky, the only alliance that is workable is between workers and peasants, against the bourgeoisie.

This is still the position of some on the far left when it comes to discussions about alliances. For some, parliamentary democracy itself is regarded as an instrument of the capitalist class - and there are small parts of the left in Britain but also in Greece, Spain and elsewhere today that still think in these terms.

Others on the left propose a strategy based on radicalising democracy, a combination of direct democracy with parliamentary democracy. In my opinion, in

the contemporary conjuncture we should be thinking about how we can combine elements of parliamentary democracy with other forms of participatory democracy, in order to create something that would be closer to 'governing with the people' or direct democracy; and thinking about how the two forms might come together.

When discussing alliances in terms of strategies we also have to look at different levels, which makes things even more complicated. Parties have to think about these questions in terms of what is happening on a national level, and what alliances are possible there, but also in terms of the European level as well - and this is something that both Syriza and Podemos have been thinking about. On the national level, where the aim is to win elections, we have to see what alliances are possible, and how we can radicalise democracy through these alliances. On the European level, we have to find allies that will work to shift the political balance in Europe, and to defend left and centre-left governments against the neoliberal policies of the currently dominant group.

What are the implications of this discussion for Syriza? In 2105 Syriza formed a coalition after the election. It was the biggest party after the poll, but in order to have sufficient support to govern it formed a coalition with a right-wing nationalist party, ANEL (Independent Greeks). At that point the choice was either that Syriza took power by working with not the most desirable partner, or it remained in opposition. A lot of people have been critical of Syriza because of that, both inside and outside Greece. Nevertheless, I think it was the best move Syriza could make at that point. We should not forget that government and state are not the same, and there are parts of the state over which Syriza has no control, including the police and the army - among whom some claim 70 per cent would vote for Golden Dawn: there was no way any leftie could become head of the Greek army without facing serious trouble. They don't even speak the same language! In the event Pannos Kammenos, the leader of ANEL, assumed the role of Minister of Defence, and he is not doing badly in that post. That doesn't mean it never gets embarrassing, because, of course, his proposals come from a right-wing nationalist perspective, but throughout the time that they have been in government ANEL have supported Syriza. You have to think about who is leading this government, and there is no question that it is led by Syriza - making the latter responsible for the failures too. But the coalition with Syriza has put constraints on some of the very dangerous stuff that a right-wing nationalist party would usually argue, in terms of refugees and so on. ANEL have

cleaned up their act; they are very careful and accept the leadership of Syriza.

On a European level, there are different challenges. The negotiations between Syriza and the Troika (IMF, ECB, EC) were based on the assumption that, in the name of unity, more forces within the EU would reject austerity. A bigger bloc of allies would cut across the organised parties within the European parliament, and it would resist neoliberalism at European level. In the long term, Syriza's victory would progressively lead to more anti-austerity governments in Europe, enabling the creation of a powerful European anti-neoliberal block. That was wishful thinking. The support never materialised, and the scenario of a 'two-speed' Europe was not without support within European power centres. At that particular moment, Syriza had no choice but to accept the terms of the lending agreement. But the need is still there for these types of alliances in order to fight against neoliberalism within the EU, especially at a time when xenophobia and racism are emerging as dominant forces in many countries and there is a risk of right-wing populist victories at the national level.

Coming to the idea of how we might bring different democratic forces together - I think it is possible on a national level, although some parties may resist it. I think it is difficult to achieve in British politics because the Labour Party are likely to resist it in the first instance. In the current environment a pre-electoral alliance would not necessarily create the numbers to win an election, but collaborations on policy issues, alliances or even a potential coalition should always be open. It unwise for Labour to refuse to consider these possibilities.

Then you have the issue of what happens with class interests in these alliances. But to pose this question as being one of *either* having these alliances *or* focusing on class struggle is the wrong starting point. I think that here we are very much into Gramscian terrain: you can talk at the same time about the 'national popular', and keep a class element within the formation of these alliances. The question is whether these alliances can become something more organic. Are they only electoral pacts that will help during an election? Or is it the case that the identity of those participating in this alliance is progressive, and through their coming together it will be modified and transformed in an organic way? My answer is that this progressive change is indeed what will happen when different groups enter into these alliances: the identity of those involved will be modified; and, moreover, there is always space there for more radicalisation and for taking account of the class dimension.

This is where we move, however, from the issue of left popular fronts and start thinking, instead, about the possibility of left populism in Europe. I would start from the premise that the identities of those that will be part of a left populist project are not already given, they do not arrive on the scene with already fixed interests. Their interests are constructed in the political process. So, although populism in mainstream discourse is a negative term, in my opinion some of the more influential forces that are currently emerging in Europe are - and call themselves - left populists. Populism in this sense is a political strategy that can be used by the left as much as the right. It will attempt to bring different and diverse demands together. But bringing these diverse demands together under one umbrella - and this is Laclau's argument - does not necessarily mean that all the elements will become a soup, or will totally lose their specificity. A chain of different demands coming together to form an equivalential whole does not necessarily mean we end up with a mash where each demand is undistinguishable from each other.

The second thing about populism is that it divides the political space into 'us' and 'them'; and that 'them', in most cases, as it has been defined right now, is those responsible for the dominance of neoliberalism. This is the response that has emerged after the crisis of 2007-8. Where neoliberalism has created a distance between the people and the mainstream parties' approaches to politics and economics, these populist parties are trying to bring the demands of the people back in. Effectively, it means that you are trying to work against the idea that this is it - TINA - there is no acceptable alternative, that we are trapped within the dominant logic.

Syriza accepts fully that it is a left populist party - in that it succeeded in bringing different and diverse demands together. And because of this it was heavily criticised by other groups on the left in Greece. But what allowed Syriza to win the election was not that everybody became left-wing, in the sense that we understand it: it was more that they saw Syriza as a party that could express their demands, and this is why they voted for Syriza in the first and second elections of 2015. The problems for Syriza started with what happened with the EU negotiations, and the fact that we had to 'capitulate'. This was not because Syriza wouldn't have liked an alternative outcome, but that could only have happened if a powerful anti-austerity bloc could have been forged within the European Union. .

Syriza is still working for that within the European Parliament - and I think

this is the way forward rather a retreat to nationalism. In September 2016 there was an Athens Summit of Southern European Countries, which brought together leaders of seven countries to find common ground on issues such as migration and the economy. The summit was not without its problems, but it was an important symbolic gesture. Some of the participants may have had little to offer in the way of an alternative. But still, it was symbolic in registering the need for the creation of a bloc based on an alliance of common interests of countries in the European South. It was also symbolic in registering opposition to some of the other groupings that have emerged within Europe, which have sought to lock its gates to refugees and regress to nationalism. It is a possible progressive alliance against summits organised by xenophobic, right-wing governments that wanted to close their borders to refugees. The Athens summit was the first to attempt to build an alliance on the progressive side of things.

As well as the national and European level, there is another arena where this discussion about alliances and populism will make a difference: the grassroots level - an area in which Podemos are working quite a lot. We are in a period where we are trying to work to make a big shift, to change substantially how we see things - economy, culture and so on - and you cannot do that simply as a party. This shift in attitudes and politics is something that should be the aim of all progressive forces within society: and it requires not only thinking on the electoral level, but trying to change certain logics on the ground as well. To some extent this happened in Greece, and these developments were supported by Syriza through the creation of solidarity networks - social clinics, food banks and other groups that were trying to ameliorate people's situation in the crisis. There were also experiments in new economics - or, rather, old economics - bringing in again the idea of co-operatives and how they can start to happen. Of course they are not that big, and would not be able to sustain a whole economy. But they are attempts on the ground to, little by little, start changing some of the dominant logics. And this can only happen if we allow these alternatives to flourish as the collective endeavour of all progressive forces in society.

‘We the people’
Sirio Canós

Spaces like this where we can have a non-rushed and analytical discussion about terms that are fairly theoretical, but at the same with a firm commitment to political change in the present, are very necessary right now. We are living in historic times, in which we are changing from one political cycle to the next, and where the old leaders have been completely discredited, and the traditional hegemony of the current political and economic elites called into question. There is a lot of anger and frustration floating around, but that anger can be directed in three different directions: it can be directed straight back into apathy - which would mean the establishment re-settles the system with a few patches but more or less as it was; it can be directed in a progressive direction, which is what we are trying to do with Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, and Corbyn here; but it can also be directed in a much more dangerous direction, through the efforts of the xenophobic, authoritarian, fascistoid movements we have been seeing recently in Eastern and Central Europe and also in the UK, Greece and elsewhere.

We need all the knowledge, experience, intelligence and skills that we can get if we are to win this fight. It’s an amazing opportunity, but if we don’t seize it it will be seized by other forces, and we will either be back to usual, though probably much more regressive, or it could get really bad if we go down the route of the right-wing populists. I watched a few documentaries on Cable Street before I came here and I thought it was fascinating: both in historical terms - for what it meant in terms of local organisation, with people coming from very different backgrounds and working together without the assistance of any big organisation - and also for its relevance today. They were having the exact same debate we are having now: if you change ‘jews’ to ‘migrants’ or ‘refugees’ you’re pretty much there. I don’t know much about British political history, but I do know quite a lot about what’s happening in Spain so I think it’s really good to have this format where we can all share and learn. The elites learn from each other, and it’s time we also started to learn from each other.

I’ve been asked to talk about how Podemos uses notions of populism. But I will first give you a bit of a timeline about what’s happened so far. Podemos was created in January 2014, and five months later it gained five MEPS in the

European elections, without any structure at all and on an entirely crowd-funded campaign. Over the following year we were involved in a long process to create a structure that would organise Podemos, trying to combine notions of participation with also being effective in preparing for the electoral year ahead: in 2015 we had local, regional and national elections. In the regional elections Podemos tripled its vote in the European elections. In the local elections Podemos did not run itself, but decided instead to back citizen platforms running independently in each city that shared the values and vision of Podemos. These independent citizen platforms were successful in the biggest cities in the country: Barcelona with Colau, Madrid with Carmena, as well as in Valencia, A Coruña and Cadiz. They have started to show that a different type of politics is possible: they've cut the debt - municipal debt was huge in Spain - while also increasing social spending. They act as an amazing proof that it is just a matter of priorities. And they're doing all of this despite the national government doing everything in its power to stop them.
Then we had the national elections in December 2015, and at the time the result felt like a defeat, because we were expecting so much more, though it was quite spectacular when you think about it: Podemos became the third political force, but it was almost a joint second. We got 21 per cent of the vote, only 1.5 per cent behind PSOE: we got 5 million votes and they got 5.4 million votes. Additionally, we were also the first force in both Catalonia and in the Basque country, which is historically unprecedented for a nation-wide party.

So that was very good in terms of electoral victories, but equally as important was the qualitative change that Podemos has brought to Spanish politics. It has radically changed the nature of the political debate. For starters, we have debates with actual content, which didn't happen before. But Podemos has also had the ability to set the agenda: topics that were never on the table before, like inequality, poverty, unemployment and evictions, are now on the table. So is tax avoidance. We have shown ourselves able to anticipate what the adversary will do, to put topics on the table and to set the framework that everybody else had to follow. I think that's very important. After the December elections, no grouping of parties managed to form a government, which meant we had a further election in June 2016, which we contested in a coalition with Izquierda Unida. with similar results. However the Conservative Party did go up in June, and, as the largest party they have now formed a minority government (as a result of PSOE abstaining, which has led to a big split in PSOE).

People often ask Podemos what its secret ingredient, or secret weapon, is. Is it the use of social networks, is it the media strategy, is it the circles on the ground? All these things are very important. But if I had to choose one defining trait I would say it's the ability to analyse the political landscape in a way that no one else had done before, and to see that there was a political landscape beyond the electoral terrain that nobody else was using.

This was largely the space created by the 15 May movement (also known as the Indignados). When the Indignados occupied the squares of Spain in 2011, the main message was, 'they [the politicians] don't represent us'. 'We're neither right nor left, we're those at the bottom, and we're going go for those at the top, we're not goods in the hands of the politicians and bankers'. Beyond the slogans there was a core sense that all of these problems - unemployment, poverty, privatisation of public services - were not unavoidable problems like the weather, but were the result of active choices by politicians who had been favouring the interests of the few at the expense of the many. This message resonated across Spanish society. Even though the people occupying the squares were a minority, polls showed - and this makes the Indignados very different from Occupy and other such movements that came afterwards - that almost 80 per cent of the Spanish population backed the occupations and their message.

What followed was social movements taking over Spain - even the most conservative sectors of society were protesting. We had doctors occupying hospitals to prevent privatisation; we had demonstrations of lawyers who went out in their gowns to protest because taxes were rising for people who were going into court and didn't have legal assistance. And yet we had national elections and the Conservatives - which had been not only the party spearheading the cuts but also the most corrupt of them to an incredible extent - won by an overwhelming absolute majority. The first reaction from everybody was frustration: how could we be so ignorant as a country as to vote these people in? What was wrong with us? But then, with a bit more time to think, it became clear: the reason the outrage on the streets was not translating into the ballot boxes was simply that it had nothing to be translated into. There were the two main parties, which although they had some differences in terms of civil rights, were virtually indistinguishable in terms of economic and labour policies. Then there were the small left-wing parties, but they were generally too busy talking to themselves and navel-gazing to notice anything that happening

outside the traditional labels. A large part of the traditional left never understood the 15M: they even looked down on them for claiming they were neither right nor left. This snobbishness is quite common: I recognise it here as well when some people talk about UKIP voters as if they were stupid or inherently racist, not realising that when working-class people vote against their own interests (whether it is the PP in Spain or UKIP here), it actually represents a failure of the left.

From this experience we learnt two important lessons. First of all, that social movements are absolutely fundamental - yes - but they're not enough. Because it doesn't matter how much you shout from below if there isn't anybody at the top willing to listen. In order to truly change things, we needed to create a political tool capable of taking back the institutions. Secondly, we learnt that there was a social majority in Spain, coming from all across the political spectrum, that agreed on certain basic things: that the decisions that shape our communal lives should be taken by democratically elected institutions; that our democratically elected representatives should represent our interests; and that the wellbeing of the population, and public services like healthcare and education, should come before any corporate interest.

These things were enough to build a social majority. Not a 'unity of the left', which wasn't enough, but a popular unity. Right and left, while perfectly valid analytical terms in certain contexts, had stopped having much meaning for most people in Spain. They were almost like football teams, with one supposedly centre-right party and one supposedly centre-left party taking turns in power and gradually de-politicising our democracy. Bringing together the people that self-identified as left simply wasn't enough, we needed to create a social majority, and 15M had demonstrated that it was possible.

Furthermore, no revolution has ever been won by saying 'We the left'; it's always 'We the people'. And that 'people' can be constructed in a variety of ways. If we don't construct it in a way that is progressive and based on democracy and human rights, others will construct it for us - and most likely in an authoritarian and xenophobic direction. There's a reason why Spain is one of the few countries that doesn't have a Golden Dawn or a UKIP or any authoritarian or xenophobic party or movement - because 15M channelled that anger towards the top instead of towards the bottom. The anger was from very early on directed towards the powerful - bankers, politicians - rather than towards the powerless or the dispossessed. This is

not because we're better or less racist than other countries. The taxi driver in Spain saying the country is going to the dogs because of the politicians and the bankers is the same taxi driver who in Hungary says the country is going to the dogs because of migrants. It's the same anger, just channelled in a different direction.

Building a popular unity, however, means abandoning some of the traditional language, flags, and dogmas of the left, and speaking a language that resonates with the common sense of your society at a given time. This doesn't mean renouncing your principles: on the contrary, it means deciding if your loyalty is towards the heritage of a given tradition or towards social justice itself. Because to truly change things you need to win, and to be able to win you need to have enough power and numbers, and that means finding common ground. Very much like the Cable Street protesters, we need to put aside the elements that divide us, focus on the many things that unite us, and find strength in our diversity. We're living times of huge political change across Europe and the world, and if we are to defeat the double threat of austerity and xenophobia, we need this unity more than ever.

Cross-class alliances?
Jeremy Gilbert

I think it's worth beginning with a definition of the popular front. Properly speaking, classically, the phrase 'popular front' refers to a cross-class alliance that includes members of the ruling class. It is not just an alliance between different subaltern classes (as Gramsci would call them), but includes a liberal section of the bourgeoisie. Its origins were as a 'front' to resist the threat to democracy from fascism in the 1930s. Arguably it could also be evoked to resist an equivalent form of right-wing authoritarian populism. It has sometimes been argued that popular fronts are justified as a strategy simply on the basis that it they make possible some kind of progressive gains, but the term should not properly be used for that particular type of project.

I think that people's memory of the popular front's strategy in the 1930s varies substantially in different countries. In Britain there tends to be a fairly positive recollection of it, because the popular front recalls the moment when the British left started to recover from the complete detonation which followed the disaster of

Ramsay Macdonald's National Government. The politics of the popular front helped the British left to pull itself together again from the mid-1930s. There are events to be quite proud of - like Cable Street, the British Battalion of the International Brigade, the fight against Hitler. To a large extent the popular front in Britain had the political objective of winning over public opinion, and the government, away from an accommodation with Hitler - in which it succeeded.

The British popular front's goal of persuading the British government to drop their commitment to the policy of appeasement - negotiating with Hitler rather than confronting fascism militarily - can be seen as very successful: Britain went to war, Britain won the war and then we got a socialist government in the 1940s, the only time in our history. So for those reasons, and from a left perspective, the British tend to have a rosy recollection of it. But the recollection of the experience in Spain is fairly different for obvious reasons: after a couple of years the 1935 popular front government collapsed, and the popular front strategy is seen by many as a largely failed political strategy, whereby the Communist Party tried to exercise authority over the rest of the republican left and completely failed to prevent Spain collapsing into fascism for several subsequent decades. Similarly, in France, the Popular Front is remembered as securing the first great electoral victory for the French left, when in 1936 a socialist-led left coalition took power. On the other hand, the government disintegrated after a year or so, and France was invaded and effectively was ruled by a fascist government.

So what you think of the popular front as a strategy often depends on the context, and it's worth keeping that in mind when thinking about historical critiques made of it, as a strategy and as a notion. In the British context, it's easy to be quite dismissive of the classic Trotskyist critique that it just didn't work as a strategy. Even if in principle it sounds like a pretty reasonable approach under particular conjunctural circumstances, empirically speaking it just didn't work very well in some contexts. It did not prevent the rise of fascism, and the fascist takeover. That has always been the basis of the Trotskyist position.

The Trotskyist critique is, essentially, that by crossing class lines, by not simply creating a united front out of non-capitalist forces, but trying to engage in a project which includes, and to some extent lets itself be led by, sections of the capitalist class, you can only end up serving the interests of the capitalist class - which, under those historical circumstances, tended to lead to the implementation of fascism.

For our contemporary situation and recent history, there are analytical strengths and weaknesses to this approach. It does focus attention on the question of objective material interests, and whether particular sets of interests are reconcilable or not, and under what circumstances they are reconcilable. But it's also obviously problematic, in that, even in the context within which Trotsky was writing, this critique assumes a very homogenous set of classes and class interests, and, in particular, it assumes that fascism can largely be explained in terms of serving the interests of the capitalist class as a whole - that that in itself was an adequate explanation of fascism, and you could identify a unified set of class interests that supported it. Even in the 1930s that was a problematic analysis: it depended on a particular kind of Marxian sociology that assumed the relative homogeneity and unity of objective class interests, and a socio-political process through which class identities over time would become clearer, starker, more divided, so that the composition of societies would become more clearly demarcated between two key class groupings: the bourgeois and the proletariat.

One of the big problems for Marxian politics and analysis since the 1970s has been the fact that one of the very clear predictions of Marxist theory - and one of the predictions on which almost all variants of Marxian-inspired socialist political strategy were predicated - and that includes the traditional labourism of the Labour Party - was the assumption that society was in the process of becoming clearly divided between the bourgeois and the proletariat, and that the petty bourgeois - the small business sector - was going to shrink. And if it wasn't going to shrink superficially, on some fundamental level it was going to become simply absorbed into the proletariat and the bourgeois class. And that's clearly not what's happened. Furthermore, it has become increasingly difficult to categorise some sections of the middle class, particularly those in the public sector, in terms of constituting a classic bourgeoisie. Some sections of the left - broadly speaking, the Gramscian left - have made some effort to engage with these developments, but they have been of little interest to Trotskyists.

Since the 1970s - partly because this has been quite cleverly engineered by the capitalist class - we've seen an expansion of the petty bourgeoisie. In countries like Britain the number of people who work in the small business sector has expanded significantly. And, very crudely, you're much less likely to belong to a trade union and to support and identify with socialists and to support a left-wing party if you're

the employee of a small business, and you're far more likely to do so if you work in the public sector or if you work for a large capitalist enterprise. We can make all the claims we want about false consciousness on the part of people in small businesses, but the fact is that the theory also predicts that tendency to false consciousness, but it also predicted that there would be less and less of those people - and there's not. All this means that the question of assembling a class alliance is much more complex than simply matching people up with a group that reflects their homogeneous and pre-given class interest.

One of the consequences of that decomposition of traditional class blocs, politically and socially, was to create the context in which the new right was able to establish a new form of right-wing populism, which articulated fairly traditional, implicitly (and explicitly) racist social conservatism and authoritarianism with neoliberal economics. It was also the context in which, in Western Europe for example, the Eurocommunist tradition revived a certain interest in the thought of Gramsci. Gramsci seemed to provide a language with which we could talk about what was going on in ways which were a bit more flexible analytically than what was available in more dogmatic, more teleological understandings of Marxism. Gramsci's understanding, in particular, of the historic bloc as an alliance between, not entire classes but specific class fractions - such as the alliance between industrial unions and manufacturers in the middle decades of the twentieth century - becomes a way of thinking about the possible flexibility of different types of cross-class political alliance and intra-class political alliance.

From the 1980s onwards, one strand of intellectual developments within that political tradition, in looking at what was happening socio-demographically, and at the ways in which theoretical technique could be used to analyse it, ended up at a place where it found it very difficult to say anything sensible about what exactly class was. So, Ernesto Laclau ends up saying 'we're not interested in class, it's not a category'. (To which my response was usually 'it *is* interested in you'.) But this conclusion was not necessary: it's not necessary to jettison any notion of class and class interest simply to recognise that class has become very complicated in advanced capitalist societies, in ways which classical Marxian socio-political theory didn't predict and didn't account for. You can say that there are things which motivate people other than class - like national identification, localised issues - without also saying that class doesn't matter any more. It clearly was a mistake to

stop trying to say something sensible about what was going on with class.

When you get to the 1990s and 2000s you see a really interesting example of a political project that shared some of the ideas of popular front politics - New Labour. New Labour's strategy could not really be classified as a classical popular front because there was not an emergency of the kind that existed in the 1930s. What it did share with popular front politics, however, was the desire to create the widest possible political alliance in order, specifically, to bring an end to eighteen years of Tory rule. When New Labour were first elected there was an overwhelming feeling of relief across the left. But the Blair government disappointed many, and, particularly after its first term, seemed keener on representing the more affluent end of the alliance. My argument at the time was that (although it was very rarely made explicit in the context of British politics) one of the key conditions of the broad acquiescence in, or lack of resistance to, New Labour among large sections of the left in spite of this shift was the fact that the Conservatives - and this was happening across Europe, this is not a new phenomenon - had turned openly towards a xenophobic populism, as a strategic response to the consequences of globalisation. The first two elections that the Conservatives fought after they lost in 1997 were on platforms which made restrictions on immigration and policies of coded xenophobia a key element of their offer. You could argue that the 'third way' politics of New Labour - or the Social Democrats in Germany, and the French and Spanish socialists, certainly the Democrats in the United States - was tolerated because, broadly speaking, people on the left found themselves marginalised, faced with a choice between a cosmopolitan version of neoliberalism, or a new-right, authoritarian, socially conservative version. It was preferable, ultimately, to support the former over the latter, and this can be understood as a weak form of popular front politics, in terms of its class logic and political logic.

We've seen the decomposition of that alliance in recent years, partly as more and larger sections of the post-industrial working class across Europe and the United States have found themselves excluded from any benefits in all forms of neoliberalism, and have lost any organic connection to the political left. We've seen in many countries that the working class has been pretty much lost to the social democrats who signed up for cosmopolitan neoliberalism. France is a very worrying example of what can happen in those circumstances. Amongst traditional working-class voters, Marine Le Pen's National Front has majority support, and that has been

building up steadily since the 1980s. The question, then, becomes: what kind of response is possible to that?

In the British context, I think there's a remarkable unanimity about this within the part of the Corbynite left in which I am involved: the key question is the extent to which it will be possible to create some kind of alliance between the metropolitan left of public sector workers and young precarious professionals, and members of militant unions like the FBU, communications workers, etc, on the one hand, and, on the other, the post-industrial working class, which is very much poised between possibly being winnable back to a left project and possibly being fully won over by UKIP's right-wing populism. But I don't think there is any need here for anything resembling a classical - or even New Labour - version of popular front strategy. We don't need to, and it would not be a good idea at this point to form alliances with sections of the actual ruling class, the 1 per cent. I think this is the key fault line in Labour politics today. The position being argued in the speech given by Tom Watson at the Labour Party conference in autumn 2016 was that it was basically unthinkable in Britain to have a government that was not committed to serving the interests of the 1 per cent before anyone else's. And it is because of this fault line that people who identify with a Gramscian political tradition now find ourselves working alongside people in the Trotskyist tradition. The nature of the conjuncture now is such that it's clear - and especially clear after the experience of New Labour - that there is some truth in the old Trotskyist claim that it is necessary to avoid finding oneself in cross-class alliances which end up just serving the interests of the bourgeoisie.

On the other hand there are some very serious debates taking place over what kind of alliance, what kind of populism. One of the things I've been arguing over the past year or so is that any imaginable social alliance against neoliberalism probably has to include the more dynamic sections of this expanded petty bourgeois group who, over the past twenty years or so, have tended to be the key audience, and a very receptive audience, for neoliberal politics. My own reading is that people working in small- to medium-sized businesses, in the tech industry, in media, in the most progressive sections of this sector, have a quite weak commitment to neoliberal norms; they tend to think of themselves as very modern, they're quite egalitarian in their instinct, and they are winnable to some progressive project. They're not really capitalists, they're not bourgeois. And I think John McDonnell's speech at the Labour

Party conference was very clearly setting out an economic and political agenda which was going to try and win over those sections to an explicitly socialist project - and I think it can do that.

Where there is much more disagreement is at the level of political understanding, of how this all plays out politically. At the Momentum Conference in Liverpool that took place at the same time as the Labour Party conference, some of the most heated debate was around the question of political strategy: what did it mean to try and take seriously the necessity to put together alliances - which didn't need to include any of the hegemonic class but did need to include different sections of the subaltern classes? There is still a strong body of opinion within that movement which thinks that a left-wing Labour Party does not need to make any alliances or engage in progressive dialogues with other political parties because Labour's historic vocation is to be *the* party of the working class - the organic, pure party of the working class - and so, for example, if the Greens want to work with us they should just affiliate to the Labour Party (cf Jon Lansman's suggestion).

There's still a real resistance from that section of the left to thinking about politics through any kind of dimension of experience other than the class dimension. One of the centrepiece debates at the conference was around the question of the national popular; about how to respond to the fact that, for a considerable number of working-class voters in England, a particular and politically potent form of national identification is becoming increasingly central to their political motivations - to the extent that it has become more powerful than any objective economic motivation.

One body of opinion argues that we have to find some way of disarticulating English national identity, and even certain kinds of English nationalism, from what has so far been a very regressive agenda - in the same way as that's been done in Scotland with Scottish identity. But there is also a body of opinion that says that it's inherently regressive to talk about nationality and national identity in England, that you just have to persuade people that nationalism is a result of false consciousness and engage with them at the level of class politics. There is still a great deal of debating, arguing and strategising to be done before it becomes clear whether or not we will be able to come up with a politics that is able to engage fully with the complexity of current social and cultural terrain; the alternative is a fantasy politics based on the fantasy narrative that somehow Labour, as the purest expression of the will of the British proletariat, will fulfil its ultimate historical vocation and create a

socialist government without the help of any other parties and without having to contaminate the purity of its proletarian identity by engaging with these national cultural questions.

* Kevin Morgan was unable to attend the seminar due to illness. His contribution is therefore based on his notes. The other contributions are edited versions of the transcript.

Thanks to Philosophy Football for hosting the event at which our seminar took place.

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