

# The question of progressive agency

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What kinds of agency are most likely to bring about  
the changes in society we so urgently need?

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At every stage of progressive political development, the question of agency - what and where are the forces and agents that might bring about change? - has been a central one. It therefore makes sense to revisit some of this theoretical history, in the hope that decisions about current political actions will be aided by a better understanding of the varieties of strategies and methods that have been made use of in the past, many of which remain relevant today.<sup>1</sup>

A starting point in these discussions has often been the ‘bourgeois revolutions’ of the late 1700s - including the French Revolution and the American War of Independence. In these mobilisations, there were perspectives which recognised newly ascendant social groups as the bearers of enlightenment and progress. The aristocrats of pre-revolutionary France were opposed and fought by those who described themselves as ‘citizens’, and who set out to overthrow their rule.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note, however, that an awareness of divisions of class and status long preceded these revolutions, or indeed the later emergence of Marxism and its perspectives, central to which was an analysis of the complex class forces they involved. Such divisions were, for example, fully articulated in the political theory and practice of ancient Greece and Rome, and were represented in the plays which Shakespeare set in the ancient world, such as *Timon of Athens*, *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*.

Here is the First Citizen, speaking against the patricians of the Senate, in *Coriolanus*:

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Care for us? True indeed! They ne'er cared for us yet. Suffer us to famish, and their storehouses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily, to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not up, they will; and there's all the love they bear us.<sup>3</sup>

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, liberals and socialists broadly shared a belief in social enlightenment and progress, but within this two clear and distinct conceptions of agency can be identified. Liberals - and some socialists - believed that participation within liberal democratic structures could gradually become available to everyone through education. Marxists, on the other hand, held the view that self-organisation by the working classes was the way forward to an equal socialist society. Each of these approaches has had a real existence and potency within many societies, but in the late twentieth and now twenty-first century each has found itself in crisis. Meanwhile, a third, more recent, approach argues that changes in information technology are making it possible for society to shift from hierarchical to lateral patterns of connection. These three approaches are examined in more detail below.

## Agency through education

The guiding idea of the first model of agency - the liberal enlightenment view - was that the extension of rationality and education throughout society would make possible the extension of democratic entitlements to all people. Liberals saw society as being made up of individuals, all of whom potentially had the opportunity to advance themselves through self-improvement (in contrast to a Marxist approach that regarded the collective agency of the working class as the only force capable of challenging the structures of inequality that they saw as integral to capitalism).<sup>4</sup> The struggle for the right to vote in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in some ways illustrates this difference. The campaign for representation from below was frequently accompanied by arguments from above about the intellectual fitness of the lower orders to exercise political power - they were deemed to be insufficiently educated and rational.<sup>5</sup> John Stuart Mill, a leading liberal advocate of representative democracy, nevertheless argued that additional voting rights should be accorded to

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the more educated among the people.

But class was not the only factor in the struggle for the right to vote. Advocates of votes for women had to contend with beliefs which assigned the powers of reason principally to males, holding women to exist outside the sphere of public rationality. And this was also the high point of Western imperialism, and colonised peoples were almost entirely excluded from democratic participation. Some kinds of imperialist belief linked the eventual possibility of emancipation and freedom to the eventual possibility of rational enlightenment among the colonised. Mostly, these views merely legitimised the indefinite continuation of colonial rule until its subjects were deemed to be 'civilised' enough to become free and self-governing. Within this perspective, restricted emancipatory and educational efforts were made under some colonial governments, mostly to facilitate colonial rule, or religious conversion, or indeed both.

The other central aspect of liberal enlightenment theory was based on the economic views of theorists such as Adam Smith, about the positive functions of markets in developing peaceful forms of exchange and development. These were the features of what Herbert Spencer later described as an 'industrial' rather than a 'military' form of society - in other words capitalism rather than feudalism. This belief in the virtues of a market society has been a key rationale for the development of the European Union, the free movement of goods, labour and capital supposedly ending the era of wars between nation states.

One might have expected that such liberal conceptions of the agency of progress would have been wholly swept aside by the destructive effects of capitalism and markets, and by the emergence of widespread class conflict and class consciousness. But the idea of advancing the cause of the working class through broadening access to education has remained important to most socialists. Even socialists whose conceptions of change were firmly rooted in the recognition of class divisions often recognised that cultural development and emancipation remained a key dimension of their struggle. Movements for workers' education, the demand for universal public education, and the recognition that oppressive social structures needed to be contested in cultural as well as material terms can be understood as embodying the absorption of liberal enlightenment conceptions within a socialist vision of society.<sup>6</sup>

This can clearly be seen in the work of Raymond Williams, whose work incorporated a concept of enlightenment within a collectivist idea of agency in a

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number of ways: his articulation of a tradition of cultural critique of capitalism in *Culture and Society*;<sup>7</sup> his contestation of the role of the media, culture and communication in maintaining class domination; and his idea that a socialist society would be one based on practices of democratic learning.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, informed by the experiences of state socialism, many on the left have come to recognise the importance of markets for economic progress, while also, of course, recognising that markets must be regulated, and subjected to what Galbraith called 'countervailing powers' - organisational forms capable of challenging markets and keeping them in check.<sup>9</sup>

### The working class as the engine of history

It is with the rise of working-class movements, and of Marxism as their most influential form of self-understanding, that the second view of agency emerged - one that has been central to progressive political debates for over a century. The rise of the working class was both a social fact, leading to new kinds of demands (the Chartists seeking the vote, trade unions and cooperatives seeking recognition), and a social phenomenon that demanded theoretical recognition and understanding.

Marx provided a powerful theory which explained how this was coming about, and what its significance was to be. He saw that, as feudalism gave way to capitalism, traditional ties of dependence on landowners were dissolved, leading to growing numbers of landless people who were forced by material necessity to sell their labour to the owners of capital, according to their competitive position in labour markets: this was the crucial development that had led to the emergence of a working class. Marx believed that this burgeoning proletariat represented the interests of humanity as a whole - of universal humankind - and would eventually supplant the power of the capitalist owners just as the power of the feudal aristocracy was already being displaced by capitalists.

The political problem that socialists faced was how this was to happen, both in relation to how groups could be organised to work collectively (for example, the large numbers of workers in factories and mines), and in relation to the theoretical models being constructed to explain their potential development. The most promising solution to this problem appeared to be emerging in industrial Germany in the latter decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, with the rise of

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the German Social Democratic Party. Here was a mass organisation which seemed to be capable of organising the working-class population in its own class interests, of gaining electoral representation, and of winning substantial concessions in regard to social welfare from employers and governments. Did it not seem reasonable to envisage that this rise in power might continue, until some crucial change in the balance of powers between landholders (still a significance force in Germany), capital and the working class might become possible?<sup>10</sup>

At the time when the Marxist social democrats of Germany were debating these questions, from more and less 'reformist' perspectives, their argument was brought to an abrupt end by the outbreak of the First World War. What then happened was that loyalty to nation, obedience to the state and antipathy to rival nations entirely overwhelmed the hopes of many socialists that class-based solidarities and working-class hostility to the dominant classes and their state institutions would lead to successful resistance to the call to patriotic war. This was neither the first nor the last time that the collective sentiments of nationalism have trumped those of class solidarity.

Then, in 1917, the Bolshevik revolution took place in Russia (bringing to an end Russian involvement in the war). For many socialists, this provided a dramatic alternative to the idea that change would be achieved through the slow grind of the now demoralised and discredited social-democratic parties, whose members and followers were being slaughtered in their millions in the trenches, with the consent of most, though not all, of their political leaders. Instead, it now seemed that the most feasible - and indeed exhilarating route - to universal emancipation lay in the decisive action of revolutionary parties: the vanguard would lead the proletariat into victory.

The success of the Russian revolution meant that Bolsheviks were now able to exercise considerable international influence, but they also provoked strong hostility both from the establishment and from social democrats who did not accept their ideas and methods. This led to fracture and division among working-class movements everywhere. Indeed, antagonism between contending elements of these movements sometimes became so bitter and intense that it seemed to take precedence over opposition towards the governing classes. In post-first world war Germany these divisions were especially destructive and disastrous. Many factors contributed to the rise of the Nazi Party and its capture of power, including the

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humiliation of Germany's defeat, the availability of cohorts of former soldiers already brutalised by war as violent recruits to the party, and economic collapse and widespread ruin. But also significant was the division of a hitherto unified working-class movement and party into two bitterly hostile factions, one looking to incite revolution while the other continued to try and build power within the existing system. The German Communist Party - formed in 1918 as a breakaway from the Social Democrats - was more concerned to defeat its rival than it was with the threat from the extreme right to all democratic political forces.

The success, or partial success, of the Bolshevik Revolution, had other lasting consequences for the issues of socialist political agency. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union sought to establish its allied and protégé parties all over the world, mostly following its own model of organisation and its prescribed ideological positions. This meant that working-class movements of revolutionary and reformist varieties were nearly everywhere divided and in competition - often fierce conflict - with one another.

After the Second World War, social-democratic parties mostly became incorporated into the alignments of the West's anti-Communist position - for example, they led governments that joined NATO, founded in 1949 as the military expression of western opposition to the communist world. As the Cold War developed, this polarisation, and the imputed threat to democratic institutions from Communist Parties, had the effect of excluding the latter from participating in national governments, although in a number of countries they won considerable electoral support immediately after the war, and continued for many years to exercise some power at regional and local levels, and through trade unions. The Cold War had the effect of freezing left parties out of full political participation, and of enforcing the subordination of social democrats to a predominantly capitalist social order. In Britain, where the Communist Party was very small, but there was a strong Labour left, a critical moment was the split in the Labour government over the priorities to be given to rearmament and social welfare in 1951, and the resignation of Nye Bevan and his allies. In the United States, the symptomatic phenomenon in the 1950s was McCarthyism and the widespread accusations of Communist infiltration of the US government.

The late 1950s saw the emergence of the New Left and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, both of whom rejected Cold War priorities and refused the choice

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of East or West. This implicitly offered the potential for escape from the crippling effects on the working-class movement and the left from this polarisation. But although the nuclear disarmament campaigns achieved some valuable recognition of the risks of nuclear war, they were defeated as broader political movements.

In 1970s Italy, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) under Enrico Berlinguer tried to negotiate a 'historic compromise' with the more progressive segments of the Christian Democrats as an attempt to escape from the exclusions of the Cold War. This was partly made possible by the PCI's break with the Soviet Union over the latter's invasion of Prague in 1968 and its overthrow of Czechoslovakia's reformist Communist government. The 'historic compromise' encountered strong resistance from the right, and from the United States, but its death blow was administered by a terrorist group of the far left, in its kidnapping and subsequent assassination of Aldo Moro, a leading Christian Democrat reformer.<sup>11</sup> After this any alliance with the left became a political impossibility for the CD reformers. One can see reform Communism in Eastern Europe during this period (as for example in the Prague Spring of 1968, when it was precisely the attempt to bring in liberalising reforms that precipitated the Soviet invasion) as a further attempt to create a form of progressive agency which was independent of the authoritarian structures of the Soviet Union.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the development of a strand of thinking and mode of organising known as 'Eurocommunism'. This was a belated incorporation of insights that Gramsci had articulated in the 1930s into the differences between modes of class struggle appropriate in different contexts - that the kind of organisation needed to confront absolutist systems of power such as Tsarism were different to those needed to overthrow Western ruling classes, which maintained their dominance through complex structures of civil society and by the management of consent. These ideas had been strongly influential within the PCI and had to a large extent underpinned their successes.

Awareness also grew on the left in this period of how complex and diluted the lines of class division in the West had become. *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* was Eric Hobsbawm's (1978) memorable diagnosis of the situation in the UK.<sup>12</sup> Communist Parties now began to diminish, and often to serve as a left wing of social democracy where they did not transform themselves overtly into social democratic parties - as happened in Italy, when the PCI became Democratic Party of the Left

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in 1991. It was often left to Trotskyist groups to keep the flame of revolutionary politics burning. They held the personality of Stalin and the backwardness of Russia - rather than the Leninist model of the vanguard party itself - responsible for the deformations of Soviet Communism, in this way remaining followers of Lenin while retaining their good conscience in the face of growing evidence of the oppression and atrocities being committed there.

Nevertheless, despite the growing fragmentation of the working class, the reformist programmes of social democrats did achieve significant gains in the decades after the Second World War. The war-time alliance with the Soviet Union had lessened some of the conflicts within the working-class movements, and Communists had earned credit in Occupied Europe for their resistance to Nazism; and although the Cold War had led to the exclusion of Communists from power, fear of their potential appeal led many Christian Democratic parties to follow a path of social and economic inclusion similar to that of the Social Democrats. Public systems of health and welfare became universal in Western Europe.

In Britain, T.H. Marshall formulated, in his essay *Citizenship and Social Class*, an optimistic model of evolutionary progress, describing the successive acquisition by the working class of first civil, then democratic, and then economic and social rights.<sup>13</sup> The post-war years were those in which workers in industry and mining became for the first time a majority of the population, and they were able for a time to exercise the political force which came from these numbers. The British Labour Party explicitly described itself as the party of the working class until 1951: it was its sequence of defeats by the Conservatives that made many of its leaders (e.g. Gaitskell and Blair) call this identification in question.<sup>14</sup>

But the idea that the post-war social-democratic development had been mainly emancipatory also came to be questioned. In the 1980s, the post-war period came to be seen by some critics, in hindsight, as the epoch of the 'Fordist' mode of production; they argued that the higher wages and greater consumption for working people had been achieved only at the cost of their subordination as producers, and as passive subjects of a capitalist economy and a bureaucratic state.<sup>15</sup> Mass production had led to mass consumption under the supervision of a paternal state. Furthermore the emerging social identity which this system had sought to inculcate from the 1950s onwards was one of competitive individualism, in which fulfilment was mainly to be looked for in consumption.



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During the late 1960s and 1970s this 'Fordist' regime encountered a prolonged period of tension. The enhanced bargaining power of the organised working class in the labour market and the workplace was threatening the hegemony of capital and its profitability. High levels of strikes and industrial conflict and wage inflation signified a crisis of the entire system of 'managed capitalism' that had evolved in the post-war period.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, during the 1960s and 1970s, new lines of dissension emerged, to some degree as a consequence of increased material security, prosperity and wider educational opportunities. Generational protests, student uprisings, the civil rights movement, second wave feminism, and later on environmentalism, added new dimensions of conflict, which became theorised as the 'new social movements'.<sup>17</sup> These levels of dissent were widely characterised as a sign of a 'legitimation crisis'(Habermas), or, as Ralph Miliband put it, 'a state of desubordination'.<sup>18</sup>

One can argue that the crisis of the 1970s was, from a progressive point of view, 'premature'. The different agencies and currents of protest were disparate, and difficult to articulate with one another or to join into functional alliances. The established social-democratic and Communist Parties found themselves trailing behind the upsurges in the streets, campuses and factories, and unable to provide political leadership for these movements. Rock and roll was hardly their thing.

But perhaps more significant were the deep divisions which emerged as cold war social democrats and progressives came up against the radical movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially in relation to the war in Vietnam. This could be seen most acutely in the United States, where the administration of President Lyndon Johnson, which had a progressive and modernising domestic agenda (civil rights, the 'Great Society' project to eliminate poverty and racial injustice) was destroyed by the overriding priority it gave to Vietnam and its framing in the context of the Cold War against communism (a reading of the Vietnamese national struggle first championed by Kennedy which even some leading Democrats, such as Robert McNamara, later came to see as mistaken). Opposition to the war fractured the New Deal coalition on which the Democrats had depended (even as Johnson had been dragging the South in a more progressive direction). Nixon's 'silent majority' was successfully mobilised against anti-war and civil rights protesters, and Nixon won in 1968, and again, overwhelmingly, in 1972, even while the Vietnam War continued. Once again, the sentiments mobilised by American nationalism and anti-

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communism overwhelmed progressive solidarities.

This mobilisation of the silent majority by a conservative populism was a forerunner of the epoch of counter-revolution, the determined roll-back by the right of post-war social democracy, led by Thatcher in Britain from 1979, and by Reagan in the USA from 1980. Globalised systems of production and distribution were enabling capital to escape the constraints and compromises imposed by organised labour. Financial deregulation gave a new freedom of movement to capital. Direct attacks on trade union power, and on systems of welfare protection, further weakened the power of the working class. These transformations were part of a neoliberal economic agenda developed by economists such as Hayek - which in Western contexts were generally pursued by democratically elected governments, but in the global South were largely imposed through US-backed military coups and Structural Adjustment Programmes.

The response of the Democratic and Labour Parties was to deliberately accommodate themselves to the neoliberal system, rebranding as 'New' Democrats and 'New' Labour, and seeking supposedly progressive ways of managing the marketised system. The collapse of European Communism from 1989 was a further setback for working-class movements, especially as the western governments took care to ensure that there was going to be no 'soft landing' of a social-democratic kind for the post-communist systems, as Gorbachev had hoped might be possible. Instead, former communist countries were forced to undergo a 'shock' treatment that turned them almost overnight into marketised economies, putting to an end their old systems of social security and full employment (such as they were). The rise of the far right in the former Eastern Germany has been one consequence of this catastrophic transition. Putin's regime of conservative nationalism is another

From 1990, global capitalism appeared to be hegemonic - except that the deep contradictions of this neoliberal regime soon began to emerge.<sup>19</sup> A succession of Middle Eastern interventions, whose deluded project was to establish capitalist democracies throughout the region, proved largely unsuccessful. While the attack on the Twin Towers of 11 September 2001 brought a violent nationalist reaction in the United States, the wars which followed from this, in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, failed to achieve their goals.<sup>20</sup> The destruction and disruption these wars have caused has brought a migration 'crisis' to Europe, contributing to a rise in far-right racism which threatens the survival of even moderate conservative governments - even

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though the numbers arriving on the continent are small compared to those displaced to countries such as Turkey and Lebanon. It turns out that the effects of imperialism in decline, and on the defensive, are even more damaging to progressive movements than was imperialism during its period of ascendancy.

In addition, the financial crisis of 2007-8 has proved that deregulated capitalism is unstable, while the regime of austerity which was adopted as the leading response to it has demonstrated that the system is incapable of assuring rising living standards for its peoples. Governing establishments, and capitalism itself, have been brought into question by these events, even though some of the most vocal and effective protests against them have come not from the left, but from nationalist movements of the right.<sup>21</sup> The agents most weakened by these events have been the social-democratic parties of the established working class and their allies among public employees. These parties have been made to pay a heavy price for their collusion with neoliberal programmes and for their unwillingness or inability to protect their constituencies. However, the recent advances of Sanders in the USA, and of the Corbyn-led Labour Party, suggest that their recovery may now be possible, if a greater hostility to neoliberalism is declared.

## The information society and new concepts of agency

So far, we have looked at the first two kinds of agency - the liberal enlightenment version which sees education of individuals as the route to progress, and the socialist one which locates agency in the organisation of the working classes. Now we consider the third theory and practice of agency, which has emerged in the past two or three decades - one which is post-capitalist in its aspiration, and post-modernist and to a degree post-Marxist in its forms of reasoning.

This conception is grounded in recent experiences of political action (for example, the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, the *Gilets Jaunes*); in the universal spread of information technology (computers, the internet, social media, etc); and in a developing theoretical paradigm which draws on several sources. These include Manuel Castells's highly prescient theory of the *Network Society*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, and Hardt and Negri's *Empire* - which provides a global political formulation of these theses.<sup>22</sup>

In so far as information technology is nevertheless a material phenomenon,

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this argument retains a Marxist filiation.<sup>23</sup> But in other ways its view of agency can be seen as lacking materialist grounding. The work of Deleuze and Guattari, for example, is written in an abstract mode, and often appears to be informed by free association and metaphor, as in their suggestion that democratic agency can be exercised through collectives which come together as ‘rhizomatic’ networks rather than ‘arborescent’ top-down structures.<sup>24</sup> Hardt and Negri Hardt (drawing on experience of an earlier autonomist workers’ movement in Italy) theorised the mobilisation of a ‘multitude’ able to develop a collective identity in opposition to capitalist institutions, joined together in a shared universalism of global citizenship.<sup>25</sup>

The most popular political statement of this position in Britain has been by Paul Mason. In his 2013 book, *Why it's Still Kicking Off Everywhere*, he quotes Manuel Castells to support his advocacy of ‘horizontalism’:

Networked social movements, as all social movements in history, bear the marks of their society. They could not exist without the internet, but their significance is much deeper. They are suited as agents of change in the network society, in sharp contrast with the obsolete political institutions inherited from an obsolete social structure.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, in *Post-Capitalism: a Guide to our Future*, Mason writes that:

By creating millions of networked people, financially exploited but with the whole of human intelligence one thumb-swipe away, info-capitalism has created a new agent of change in history: the educated and connected human being.<sup>27</sup>

The essential argument of this paradigm of agency is that dominant forms of communication in modern societies are now shifting from hierarchical to lateral patterns of connection. What makes this change possible is information technology and its applications to virtually all spheres of life. The transfer of information, it is argued, has become virtually without cost, once the infrastructure of the internet, ‘platforms’, and technologies like smartphones have been made available. Jeremy Rifkin has argued that not only information but also material products will soon be able to be produced at zero marginal cost (e.g. through 3D printing).<sup>28</sup> Production

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will then take place outside markets, and it will no longer be driven by competitive success in driving down marginal costs; and this means that there will no longer be the ability to make profits, and capitalism will be displaced by a social economy based on material abundance.

There are contentious issues to be debated here, including a number of reservations about what kind of alternative to capitalism may realistically be represented by a 'social economy' of abundance and zero marginal costs.<sup>29</sup> But because of changes in forms of communication, it certainly has become possible for groups to be gathered together, protests to be mobilised, even revolutionary movements to be created, in very short periods of time, sometimes almost instantly. And these have been able to mobilise without the mediation of representative, hierarchical organisations with their cumbersome infrastructures of branches, printing presses and the capacity to pay salaries to their functionaries. These means of communication also make it possible for organisations that are agile enough to find new supporters and sources of energy to displace their established competitors.

The May Events of 1968 can be seen as a kind of 'trial run' for this development, though with technologies little more advanced than the printing press and the telephone. The pop-up dance venues of rave culture, set up in defiance of licensing rules, have also been an aspect of this phenomenon.

The rapid emergence of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, in combination with the movements such as Occupy discussed above and the broader insurgencies in Spain and Greece, persuaded Paul Mason that a new era of popular democratic agency had arrived. And Hardt and Negri's idea of the 'multitude' chimed in with this analysis.

While this kind of optimistic reading of the democratic and mobilising potentials of the new electronic forms of communication is certainly possible, it has become obvious in the current phase of nationalist populism that these developments have their dystopian potential also. The infrastructures which enable lateral communication between radical democratic agents of the left are also accessible to radicals of the far right, in its nationalist, religious or indeed terroristic forms, as Castells recognised from the beginning.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, powerful commercial entities - including internet corporations such as Facebook, Google, Twitter and Amazon, the giant industrial monopolies of the twenty-first century - control and manage these infrastructures to their own profit-seeking advantage.

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What once seemed to be mainly a space for free lateral communication has been penetrated and manipulated in the service of ultra-rich and ultra-conservative manipulators of democratic politics. The weaknesses in regulation of the new communications technologies, and the 'de-inhibition' of agents able to conceal their identities, has led to an increased violence and viciousness of exchanges, and to the pervasiveness of intimidation, abuse and threat, which seem far from beneficial to progressive political advocacy. Moreover, a system that offers an expanded means of learning and democratic exchange for some, can become an enhanced means of surveillance, vilification and control in the hands of others.

We need to ask what *politically* explains the rise and salience of this new approach to agency? And it seems fair to conclude that, at least in considerable part, it is an outcome of the failure of the left's traditional agencies - its political parties, representative governmental institutions and trade unions - to protect people from the scourges of austerity and wars, and the social disorganisation which these have brought about. The prospect of ongoing improvement, generation by generation, which appeared to be on the horizon until the 1970s, seems to have vanished, especially for the young. Social-democratic parties have been in particularly severe decline, virtually disappearing as a political force in some nations.

What were once progressive institutions are now often seen as collusive or impotent in the face of so many threats to well-being, to the extent that they have come to be seen as part of a repressive and uncaring 'establishment', which can only be effectively confronted through spontaneous mass action. The crisis of global warming is the most important issue in this crisis, with the recent strike of schoolchildren the most remarkable recent manifestation of an emerging concept of popular agency and activism. Within the entire populations across the world that are threatened by climate change, we must hope there really is the potential 'multitude' about whose potential for action Hardt and Negri, and in different idiom Paul Mason, have optimistically written.

However, a measure of caution is necessary. Collectivities can be rapidly gathered together by mobilisations effected through the internet, but they seem liable to disperse equally quickly. Six million electronic signatures were obtained in two weeks in March 2019 in support of remaining in the European Union, and a million people turned out to march in favour of holding a second referendum. But what commitment and capacity for political *work* is indicated by what were highly

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meaningful but nevertheless short-lived demonstrative actions? And what can be achieved in terms of resistance to old practices, and the development of new ones, without the sustained sacrifice and work which has sustained traditional kinds of radical practice?

Perhaps the social changes which have made possible this new horizontalism and immediacy of agency are also capable of renewing more traditional forms of agency and organisation. In a recent *Soundings* article, I suggested that the successful mobilisation of Democrats in the recent US Congressional Election represented a potential for what Gramsci might have called a 'progressive modernisation', based on his idea of alliances between rising social classes and social groups.<sup>31</sup> The Democrat coalition of November 2018 was based on a majority of the young, women, the better educated, and ethnic minority populations - many of whom are being empowered by the new forms of communication of the information age. And there are other signs of emerging alliances made possible through the mobilising potential of the virtual and the material, including the rise of Corbynism in the UK.

The rethinking and renewal of institutions that modern societies now need is a profound and complex one, and one which calls for deep engagement with issues of structure, process and power. I would argue that both 'new' and 'old' conceptions of agency are relevant to this task.

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## Notes

1. This article is part of the *Soundings* series on critical terms, which seeks to explore some of the main ideas at play in the current political conjuncture. The series was introduced in Deborah Grayson and Ben Little, '*Soundings* critical terms: conjunctural analysis and the crisis of ideas', *Soundings* 65, 2017. Each instalment outlines the theoretical and historical background of a particular idea or set of ideas.
2. In Haiti, people enslaved by these French citizens fought for their own freedom, using the same arguments about liberty and fraternity. But, in the main - and as the subsequent history of Haiti itself shows - the European idea of who could be a free citizen remained embedded within assumptions of white supremacy.
3. *Coriolanus*, Scene I, Act 1.
4. Most Social Democrats of the nineteenth century shared in this latter view, but held

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widely varying views about how this working-class force should organise itself - see below.

5. This was an issue even for the radicals of the seventeenth-century English Revolution. John Milton, its committed supporter, believed the Levellers' (limited) democratic programme to be unfeasible in the uneducated society of his time. See C. Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, Faber and Faber 1977, pp169-70.
6. Many theorists would also distinguish between an elite culture that helps maintain the dominance of the ruling class and a popular culture that can sustain the working class in its struggles. These are complex and ongoing arguments.
7. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, Chatto and Windus 1958.
8. Ibid.
9. J.K. Galbraith, *American Capitalism: the Concept of Countervailing Power*, Hamish Hamilton 1957.
10. This account follows those given by C.E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905-1917: The Development of the Great Schism*, Harvard University Press 1995; and Barrington Moore, *Injustice: the Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*, Palgrave Macmillan 1979.
11. Terrorism can embody a coherent theory of agency too. One of its guiding beliefs is that oppressive responses to terrorist acts even by small numbers of agents will provoke broader popular resistance and revolt. Even the recent massacres in Sri Lanka may have had such a rationale.
12. E. Hobsbawm, 'The forward march of labour halted?', *Marxism Today*, September 1978.
13. T.H. Marshall, 'Citizenship and social class', in *Citizenship and Social Class*, Cambridge University Press 1950.
14. The effective abolition in 1995 by Tony Blair of Clause 4 of the Labour Party's Constitution, which had called for the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, was a symbolic focus of this argument.
15. R. Murray, 'Benetton Britain: the new economic order', *Marxism Today*, November 1985; and 'Life after Henry Ford', *Marxism Today*, October 1988.
16. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (S. Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke and B. Roberts, Macmillan 1978/2013) gives a fine account of this crisis of 'corporatism'.
17. A. Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements*, Cambridge University Press 1981.
18. See J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, Heinemann 1976; R. Miliband, 'A state of desubordination', *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol 29 (4) 1978.
19. Doreen Massey and I argued in the *Kilburn Manifesto* that these neo-imperialist adventures were the international face of neo liberalism: [https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/08\\_rethinkingneoliberalworld.pdf](https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/08_rethinkingneoliberalworld.pdf).
20. The Afghanistan war cannot be won, Iraq is now governed by its Shia majority, Libya has no unified government, Syria remains under the control of Assad, and the



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Iranian revolution of 1981 survives, though in the face of immense US hostility.

21. Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece each attempted such a renewal of the left constructed as 'the people' against the established social-democratic parties, but of course also against capital. Neither have succeeded, but perhaps they nevertheless signified a necessary element of the future. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose ideas influenced Podemos, argued that political solidarities had to be made through ideological discourse and action, and could not be 'read off' as the effects of class or other social positions. See E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Verso 1985. Some see this view as excessively voluntarist: see my own 'Absolute voluntarism: critique of a post-Marxist concept of hegemony', *New German Critique*, No 42, Winter 1988.

22. M. Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, Cambridge University Press 2012; G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Athlone Press 1988; M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press. See also my critical review of Hardt and Negri, which also sets out its argument: M.J. Rustin, 'Empire: a post-modern theory of revolution', in G. Balakrishnan (ed), *Debating Empire*, Verso 2005.

23. For example Carlota Perez has argued for the interconnection between new waves of technological innovation and cycles within the economy. See her *Technological Revolutions and Financial Capital* (Edward Elgar 2002). Phoebe Moore has written in *Soundings* about 'Industry 4.0' - the fourth, IT, industrial revolution. See Phoebe Moore, 'On work and machines: a labour process of agility', *Soundings* 69 Summer 2018.

24. In their riposte to Foucault's argument about the pervasiveness of power, Deleuze and Guattari draw on a vitalist tradition, rooted in the philosophical thinking of Bergson, which sees the potency of desires as being countered by internal and external forms of repression. In Deleuze and Guattari's vision of democratic agency, thoughts and actions which escape disciplinary and institutional repression - through 'deterritorialisation' and 'rhizomatic' moves - play a crucial role.

25. M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin 2004.

26. P. Mason, *Why It's (Still) Kicking Off Everywhere: the New Global Revolutions*, Verso 2013, p293, citing Castells' *Networks of Outrage and Hope*.

27. P. Mason, *Post-Capitalism: a Guide to our Future*, Allen Lane 2015, pxvii.

28. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society*, Palgrave Macmillan 2014.

29. Phoebe Moore, for example, is much more pessimistic about the ways in which capital makes use of new technology (in 'On work and machines').

30. M. Castells, *The Information Age: Economy Society and Culture, Vols 1, 2 and 3*, Blackwell 1998. See also Ben Little and Deborah Grayson, 'The national in the network society: UKUncut, the English Defence League and the challenge for social democracy', in Rutherford and Henning (eds), *The Future of European Social Democracy: Building the Good Society*, Palgrave Macmillan 2011.

31. M.J. Rustin, 'Conversations with Stuart Hall: Is there an alternative to reactionary modernisation?' *Soundings* 71 spring 2019: <https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/71/conversations-with-stuart-hall>.