

# **INVENTING THE FUTURE**

*Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*

**Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams**



VERSO

London • New York

First published by Verso 2015  
© Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams 2015

All rights reserved

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso  
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG  
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11101  
[www.versobooks.com](http://www.versobooks.com)

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-78478-096-8 (PB)  
eISBN-13: 978-1-78478-098-2 (US)  
eISBN-13: 978-1-78478-097-5 (UK)

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**  
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset in Electra LT Std by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh, Scotland  
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1. Our Political Common Sense: Introducing Folk Politics	5
2. Why Aren't We Winning? A Critique of Today's Left	25
3. Why Are They Winning? The Making of Neoliberal Hegemony	51
4. Left Modernity	69
5. The Future Isn't Working	85
6. Post-Work Imaginaries	107
7. A New Common Sense	129
8. Building Power	155
Conclusion	175
<i>Notes</i>	185
<i>Index</i>	241



## Chapter 1

# Our Political Common Sense: Introducing Folk Politics

*The next move was ours, and we just stood there, waiting for something to happen, like good conscientious objectors awaiting our punishment after our purely symbolic point had been made.*

Dave Mitchell

Today it appears that the greatest amount of effort is needed to achieve the smallest degree of change. Millions march against the Iraq War, yet it goes ahead as planned. Hundreds of thousands protest austerity, but unprecedented budget cuts continue. Repeated student protests, occupations and riots struggle against rises in tuition fees, but they continue their inexorable advance. Around the world, people set up protest camps and mobilise against economic inequality, but the gap between the rich and the poor keeps growing. From the alter-globalisation struggles of the late 1990s, through the anti-war and ecological coalitions of the early 2000s, and into the new student uprisings and Occupy movements since 2008, a common pattern emerges: resistance struggles rise rapidly, mobilise increasingly large numbers of people, and yet fade away only to be replaced by a renewed sense of apathy, melancholy and defeat. Despite the desires of millions for a better world, the effects of these movements prove minimal.

## A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE PROTEST

Failure permeates this cycle of struggles, and as a result, many of the tactics on the contemporary left have taken on a ritualistic nature, laden with a heavy dose of fatalism. The dominant tactics – protesting, marching, occupying, and various other forms of direct action – have become part of a well-established narrative, with the people and the police each playing their assigned roles. The limits of these actions are particularly visible in those brief moments when the script changes. As one activist puts it, of a protest at the 2001 Summit of the Americas:

On April 20, the first day of the demonstrations, we marched in our thousands towards the fence, behind which 34 heads of state had gathered to hammer out a hemispheric trade deal. Under a hail of catapult-launched teddy bears, activists dressed in black quickly removed the fence's supports with bolt-cutters and pulled it down, with grapples as onlookers cheered them on. For a brief moment, nothing stood between us and the convention centre. We scrambled atop the toppled fence, but for the most part we went no further, as if our intention all along had been simply to replace the state's chain-link and concrete barrier with a human one of our own making.<sup>1</sup>

We see here the symbolic and ritualistic nature of the actions, combined with the thrill of having done *something* – but with a deep uncertainty that appears at the first break with the expected narrative. The role of dutiful protestor had given these activists no indication of what to do when the barriers fell. Spectacular political confrontations like the Stop the War marches, the now-familiar melees against the G20 or World Trade Organization and the rousing scenes of democracy in Occupy Wall Street all give the appearance of being highly significant, as if something were genuinely at stake.<sup>2</sup> Yet nothing changed, and long-term victories were traded for a simple registration of discontent.

To outside observers, it is often not even clear what the movements want, beyond expressing a generalised discontent with the world. The 'contemporary protest has become a melange of wild and varied demands. The 2009 G20 summit in London, for instance, featured protestors marching for issues

that spanned from grandiose anti-capitalist stipulations to modest goals centred on more local issues. When demands can be discerned at all, they usually fail to articulate anything substantial. They are often nothing more than empty slogans – as meaningful as calling for world peace. In more recent struggles, the very idea of making demands has been questioned. The Occupy movement infamously struggled to articulate meaningful goals, worried that anything too substantial would be divisive.<sup>3</sup> And a broad range of student occupations across the Western world has taken up the mantra of ‘no demands’ under the misguided belief that demanding nothing is a radical act.<sup>4</sup>

When asked what the ultimate upshot of these actions has been, participants differ between admitting to a general sense of futility and pointing to the radicalisation of those who took part. If we look at protests today as an exercise in public awareness, they appear to have had mixed success at best. Their messages are mangled by an unsympathetic media smitten by images of property destruction – assuming that the media even acknowledges a form of contention that has become increasingly repetitive and boring. Some argue that, rather than trying to achieve a certain end, these movements, protests and occupations in fact exist only for their own sake.<sup>5</sup> The aim in this case is to achieve a certain transformation of the participants, and create a space outside of the usual operations of power. While there is a degree of truth to this, things like protest camps tend to remain ephemeral, small-scale and ultimately unable to challenge the larger structures of the neoliberal economic system. This is politics transmuted into pastime – politics-as-drug-experience, perhaps – rather than anything capable of transforming society. Such protests are registered only in the minds of their participants, bypassing any transformation of social structures. While these efforts at radicalisation and awareness-raising are undoubtedly important to some degree, there still remains the question of exactly *when* these sequences might pay off. Is there a point at which a critical mass of consciousness-raising will be ready for action? Protests can build connections, encourage hope and remind people of their power. Yet, beyond these transient feelings, politics still demands the exercise of that power, lest these affective bonds go to waste. If we will not act after one of the largest crises of capitalism, then when?

The emphasis on the affective aspects of protests plays into a broader trend that has come to privilege the affective as the site of real politics. Bodily,

## 8 INVENTING THE FUTURE

emotional and visceral elements come to replace and stymie (rather than complement and enhance) more abstract analysis. The contemporary landscape of social media, for example, is littered with the bitter fallout from an endless torrent of outrage and anger. Given the individualism of current social media platforms – premised on the maintenance of an online identity – it is perhaps no surprise to see online ‘politics’ tend towards the self-presentation of moral purity. We are more concerned to appear right than to think about the conditions of political change. Yet these daily outrages pass as rapidly as they emerge, and we are soon on to the next vitriolic crusade. In other places, public demonstrations of empathy with those suffering replace more finely tuned analysis, resulting in hasty or misplaced action – or none at all. While politics always has a relationship to emotion and sensation (to hope or anger, fear or outrage), when taken as the primary mode of politics, these impulses can lead to deeply perverse results. In a famous example, 1985’s Live Aid raised huge amounts of money for famine relief through a combination of heartstring-tugging imagery and emotionally manipulative celebrity-led events. The sense of emergency demanded urgent action, at the expense of thought. Yet the money raised actually extended the civil war causing the famine, by allowing rebel militias to use the food aid to support themselves.<sup>6</sup> While viewers at home felt comforted they were doing something rather than nothing, a dispassionate analysis revealed that they had in fact contributed to the problem. These unintended outcomes become even more pervasive as the targets of action grow larger and more abstract. If politics without passion leads to cold-hearted, bureaucratic technocracy, then passion bereft of analysis risks becoming a libidinally driven surrogate for effective action. Politics comes to be about feelings of personal empowerment, masking an absence of strategic gains.

Perhaps most depressing, even when movements have some successes, they are in the context of overwhelming losses. Residents across the UK, for example, have successfully mobilised in particular cases to stop the closure of local hospitals. Yet these real successes are overwhelmed by larger plans to gut and privatisate the National Health Service. Similarly, recent anti-fracking movements have been able to stop test drilling in various localities – but governments nevertheless continue to search for shale gas resources and provide support for companies to do so.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, various movements to stop evictions in the wake of the housing crisis have made real gains

in terms of keeping people in their homes.<sup>8</sup> Yet the perpetrators of the subprime mortgage debacle continue to reap the profits, waves of foreclosures continue to sweep across the country, and rents continue to surge across the urban world. Small successes – useful, no doubt, for instilling a sense of hope – nevertheless wither in the face of overwhelming losses. Even the most optimistic activist falters in the face of struggles that continue to fail. In other cases, well-intentioned projects like Rolling Jubilee strive to escape the spell of neoliberal common sense.<sup>9</sup> The ostensibly radical aim of crowdsourcing money to pay the debts of the underprivileged means buying into a system of voluntary charity and redistribution, as well as accepting the legitimacy of the debt in the first place. In this respect, the initiative is one among a larger group of projects that act simply as crisis responses to the faltering of state services. These are survival mechanisms, not a desirable vision for the future.

What can we conclude from all of this? The recent cycle of struggles has to be identified as one of overarching failure, despite a multitude of small-scale successes and moments of large-scale mobilisation. The question that any analysis of the left today must grapple with is simply: What has gone wrong? It is undeniable that heightened repression by states and the increased power of corporations have played a significant role in weakening the power of the left. Still, it remains debatable whether the repression faced by workers, the precarity of the masses and the power of capitalists is any greater than it was in the late nineteenth century. Workers then were still struggling for basic rights, often against states more than willing to use lethal violence against them.<sup>10</sup> But whereas that period saw mass mobilisation, general strikes, militant labour and radical women's organisations all achieving real and lasting successes, today is defined by their absence. The recent weakness of the left cannot simply be chalked up to increased state and capitalist repression: an honest reckoning must accept that problems also lie *within* the left. One key problem is a widespread and uncritical acceptance of what we call 'folk-political' thinking.

## **DEFINING FOLK POLITICS**

What is folk politics? Folk politics names a constellation of ideas and intuitions within the contemporary left that informs the common-sense ways of organising, acting and thinking politics. It is a set of strategic assumptions that

threatens to debilitate the left, rendering it unable to scale up, create lasting change or expand beyond particular interests. Leftist movements under the sway of folk politics are not only unlikely to be successful – they are in fact incapable of transforming capitalism. The term itself draws upon two senses of ‘folk’. First, it evokes critiques of folk psychology which argue that our intuitive conceptions of the world are both historically constructed and often mistaken.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, it refers to ‘folk’ as the locus of the small-scale, the authentic, the traditional and the natural. Both of these dimensions are implied in the idea of folk politics.

As a first approximation, we can therefore define folk politics as a collective and historically constructed political common sense that has become out of joint with the actual mechanisms of power. As our political, economic, social and technological world changes, tactics and strategies which were previously capable of transforming collective power into emancipatory gains have now become drained of their effectiveness. As the common sense of today’s left, folk politics often operates intuitively, uncritically and unconsciously. Yet common sense is also historical and mutable. It is worth recalling that today’s familiar forms of organisation and tactics, far from being natural or pre-given, have instead been developed over time in response to specific political problems. Petitions, occupations, strikes, vanguard parties, affinity groups, trade unions: all arose out of particular historical conditions.<sup>12</sup> Yet the fact that certain ways of organising and acting were once useful does not guarantee their continued relevance. Many of the tactics and organisational structures that dominate the contemporary left are responses to the experience of state communism, exclusionary trade unions, and the collapse of social democratic parties. Yet the ideas that made sense in the wake of those moments no longer present effective tools for political transformation. Our world has moved on, becoming more complex, abstract, nonlinear and global than ever before.

Against the abstraction and inhumanity of capitalism, folk politics aims to bring politics down to the ‘human scale’ by emphasising temporal, spatial and conceptual immediacy. At its heart, folk politics is the guiding intuition that immediacy is always better and often more authentic, with the corollary being a deep suspicion of abstraction and mediation. In terms of temporal immediacy, contemporary folk politics typically remains reactive (responding to actions initiated by corporations and governments, rather than initiating

actions);<sup>13</sup> ignores long-term strategic goals in favour of tactics (mobilising around single-issue politics or emphasising process);<sup>14</sup> prefers practices that are often inherently fleeting (such as occupations and temporary autonomous zones);<sup>15</sup> chooses the familiarities of the past over the unknowns of the future (for instance, the repeated dreams of a return to ‘good’ Keynesian capitalism);<sup>16</sup> and expresses itself as a predilection for the voluntarist and spontaneous over the institutional (as in the romanticisation of rioting and insurrection).<sup>17</sup>

In terms of spatial immediacy, folk politics privileges the local as the site of authenticity (as in the 100-miles diet or local currencies);<sup>18</sup> habitually chooses the small over the large (as in the veneration of small-scale communities or local businesses);<sup>19</sup> favours projects that are un-scalable beyond a small community (for instance, general assemblies and direct democracy);<sup>20</sup> and often rejects the project of hegemony, valuing withdrawal or exit rather than building a broad counter-hegemony.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, folk politics prefers that actions be taken by participants themselves – in its emphasis on direct action, for example – and sees decision-making as something to be carried out by each individual rather than by any representative. The problems of scale and extension are either ignored or smoothed over in folk-political thinking.

Finally, in terms of conceptual immediacy, there is a preference for the everyday over the structural, valorising personal experience over systematic thinking; for feeling over thinking, emphasising individual suffering, or the sensations of enthusiasm and anger experienced during political actions; for the particular over the universal, seeing the latter as intrinsically totalitarian; and for the ethical over the political – as in ethical consumerism, or moralising critiques of greedy bankers.<sup>22</sup> Organisations and communities are to be transparent, rejecting in advance any conceptual mediation, or even modest amounts of complexity. The classic images of universal emancipation and global change have been transformed into a prioritisation of the suffering of the particular and the authenticity of the local. As a result, any process of constructing a universal politics is rejected from the outset.

Understood in these ways, we can detect traces of folk politics in organisations and ‘movements like Occupy, Spain’s 15M, student occupations, left communist insurrectionists like Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee, most forms of horizontalism, the Zapatistas, and contemporary anarchist-tinged politics, as well as a variety of other trends like political localism, the

slow-food movement, and ethical consumerism, among many others. But no single position embodies all of these dispositions, which leads us to a first qualification: as an uncritical and often unconscious common sense, folk politics comes to be instantiated to varying degrees in concrete political positions. That is to say, folk politics does not name an explicit position, but only an implicit tendency. The ideas that characterise this tendency are widely dispersed throughout the contemporary left, but some positions are more folk-political than others. This brings us to a second important qualification: the problem with folk politics is not that it starts from the local; all politics begins from the local. The problem is rather that folk-political thinking is content to remain at (and even privileges) that level – of the transient, the small-scale, the unmediated and the particular. It takes these to be sufficient rather than simply necessary moments. Therefore, the point is not simply to reject folk politics. Folk politics is a necessary component of any successful political project, but it can only be a starting point. A third qualification is that folk politics is only a problem for particular types of projects: those that seek to move beyond capitalism. Folk-political thinking can be perfectly well adapted to other political projects: projects aimed solely at resistance, movements organised around local issues, and small-scale projects. Political movements based around keeping a hospital open or preventing evictions are all admirable, but they are importantly different from movements trying to challenge neoliberal capitalism. The idea that one organisation, tactic or strategy applies equally well to any sort of struggle is one of the most pervasive and damaging beliefs among today's left. Strategic reflection – on means and ends, enemies and allies – is necessary before approaching any political project. Given the nature of global capitalism, any postcapitalist project will require an ambitious, abstract, mediated, complex and global approach – one that folk-political approaches are incapable of providing.

Combining these qualifications, we can therefore say that folk politics is necessary but insufficient for a postcapitalist political project. By emphasising and remaining at the level of the immediate, folk politics lacks the tools to transform neoliberalism into something else. While folk politics cannot doubtless make important interventions in local struggles, we deceive ourselves when we think these are turning the tide against global capitalism. They represent, at best, temporary respite against its onslaught. The project of this book is to begin outlining an alternative – a way for the left to navigate from

the local to the global, and synthesise the particular with the universal. Such an alternative cannot simply be a conservative reversion to the working-class politics of the last century. It must instead combine an updated way of *thinking* politics (a shift from immediacy to structural analysis) with an upgraded means of *doing* politics (which directs action towards building platforms and expanding scales).

## OVERWHELMED

Why did folk politics arise in the first place? Why is it that folk political tendencies, for all their manifest flaws, are so seductive and appealing to the movements of today? At least three answers present themselves. The first explanation is to see folk politics as a response to the problem of how to interpret and act within an ever more complex world. The second, related explanation involves situating folk politics as a reaction to the historical experiences of the communist and social democratic left. Finally, folk politics is a more immediate response to the empty spectacle of contemporary party politics.

Increasingly, multipolar global politics, economic instability, and anthropogenic climate change outpace the narratives we use to structure and make sense of our lives. Each of these is an example of what is termed a *complex system*, which features nonlinear dynamics, where marginally different inputs can cause dramatically divergent outputs, intricate sets of causes feedback on one another in unexpected ways, and which characteristically operates on scales of space and time that go far beyond any individual's unaided perception.<sup>23</sup> Globalisation, international politics, and climate change: each of these systems shapes our world, but their effects are so extensive and complicated that it is difficult to place our own experience within them. The global economy is a good example of this. In simple terms, the economy is not an object amenable to direct perception; it is distributed across time and space (you will never meet 'the economy' in person); it incorporates a wide array of elements, from property laws to biological needs, natural resources to technological infrastructures, market stalls and supercomputers; and it involves an enormous and intricately interacting set of feedback loops, all of which produce emergent effects that are irreducible to its individual components.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the interaction of an economy's parts produces effects that cannot be understood just by knowing

how those parts work in isolation – it is only in grasping the relations between them that the economy can be made sense of. While we might have an idea of what an economy consists of, we will never be able to experience it directly in the same way as other phenomena. It can only be observed symptomatically through key statistical indexes (charting changes in inflation or interest rates, stock indexes, GDP, and so on), but can never be seen, heard or touched in its totality.

As a result, despite everything that has been written about capitalism, we still struggle to understand its dynamics and its mechanisms. Most importantly, we lack a ‘cognitive map’ of our socioeconomic system: a mental picture of how individual and collective human action can be situated within the unimaginable vastness of the global economy.<sup>25</sup> Recent decades have seen an increasing complexity in the dynamics that impinge upon politics. We might consider the imminent threat of anthropogenic climate change as a new kind of problem – one that is unamenable to any simple solution and that involves such intricately woven effects that it is hard to even know where to intervene. Equally, the global economy today appears significantly more complex in terms of the mobility of capital, the intricacies of global finance and the multiplicity of actors involved. How well do our traditional political images of the world map onto these changes? For the left at least, an analysis premised on the industrial working class was a powerful way to interpret the totality of social and economic relations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thereby articulating clear strategic objectives. Yet the history of the global left over the course of the twentieth century alerts us to the ways in which this analysis failed to attend to both the range of possible liberating struggles (based in gender, race or sexuality) and the ability of capitalism to restructure itself – through the creation of the welfare state, or the neoliberal transformations of the global economy. Today, the old models often falter in the face of new problems; we lose the capacity to understand our position in history and in the world at large.

This separation between everyday experience and the system we live within results in increased alienation: we feel adrift in a world we do not understand. The cultural theorist Fredric Jameson notes that the proliferation of conspiracy theories is partly a response to this situation.<sup>26</sup> Conspiracy theories act by narrowing the agency behind our world to a single figure of power (the Bilderberg Group, the Freemasons or some other convenient

scapegoat). Despite the extraordinary complexity of some of these theories, they nevertheless provide a reassuringly simple answer to ‘who is behind it all’, and what our own role is in the situation. In other words, they act precisely as a (faulty) cognitive map.

Folk politics presents itself as another possible response to the problems of overwhelming complexity. If we do not understand how the world operates, the folk-political injunction is to reduce complexity down to a human scale. Indeed, folk-political writing is saturated with calls for a return to authenticity, to immediacy, to a world that is ‘transparent’, ‘human-scaled’, ‘tangible’, ‘slow’, ‘harmonious’, ‘simple’, and ‘everyday’.<sup>27</sup> Such thinking rejects the complexity of the contemporary world, and thereby rejects the possibility of a truly postcapitalist world. It attempts to give a human face to power; whereas what is truly terrifying is the generally asubjective nature of the system. The faces are interchangeable; the power remains the same. The turn towards localism, temporary moments of resistance, and the intuitive practices of direct action all effectively attempt to condense the problems of global capitalism into concrete figures and moments.

In this process, folk politics often reduces politics to an ethical and individual struggle. There is a tendency sometimes to imagine that we simply need ‘good’ capitalists, or a ‘responsible’ capitalism. At the same time, the imperative to ‘make it local’ leads folk politics to fetishise immediate results and the concrete appearance of action. Delaying a corporate attack on the environment, for instance, is lauded as a success – even if the company simply waits out public attention before returning once again. Moreover, as Rosa Luxemburg pointed out long ago, the fetishisation of ‘immediate results’ leads to an empty pragmatism that struggles to maintain the present balance of power, rather than seeking to change structural conditions.<sup>28</sup> Without the necessary abstraction of strategic thought, tactics are ultimately fleeting gestures. Finally, the abjuring of complexity dovetails with the neoliberal case for markets. One of the primary arguments made against planning has been that the economy is simply too complex to be guided.<sup>29</sup> The only alternative is therefore to leave the distribution of resources to the market and reject any attempt to guide it rationally.<sup>30</sup> Considered in all these ways, folk politics appears as an attempt to make global capitalism small enough to be thinkable – and at the same time, to articulate how to act upon this restricted image of capitalism. By contrast, the argument of this book is that

folk-political tendencies are mistaken. If complexity presently outstrips humanity's capacities to think and control, there are two options: one is to reduce complexity down to a human scale; the other is to expand humanity's capacities. We endorse the latter position. Any postcapitalist project will necessarily require the creation of new cognitive maps, political narratives, technological interfaces, economic models, and mechanisms of collective control to be able to marshal complex phenomena for the betterment of humanity.

## **OUTDATED**

While the response to increasing complexity goes some way towards explaining the rise of folk-political thinking, it must also be situated in terms of the particular history of left politics in the twentieth century. In many respects, folk-political tendencies are understandable (if inadequate) responses to the challenges faced in the last fifty years – challenges that have emerged both within the left and in competition with conservative and capitalist forces.<sup>31</sup> In particular, folk politics emerged as a response to the collapse of the postwar social democratic complex that knitted together working-class institutions, social democratic parties, and the hegemony of embedded liberalism.<sup>32</sup> The breakdown of this social democratic bloc occurred across multiple lines of conflict and in various spheres: in the emergence of new forms of work, associated with the affective and cognitive; in the emergence of energy crises that disrupted geopolitical certainties; in the increasing difficulties capitalist enterprises faced in achieving profitability; in the proliferation of neoliberal ideology through the institutional networks of think tanks and university departments; in the explosion of new forms of political subjectivities, projects and demands; and in the widespread discrediting of nominally communist states. Each of these factors served to disrupt the foundation of the postwar social system in Europe and America. In this process, there was both an *outdating* of old left paradigms and an *outmanoeuvring* of the new ones.

Perhaps the most significant point in this destabilisation of the postwar settlement was in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The global revolts of 1968 gave both new prominence and new inspiration to a series of left movements that rejected the coordinates of struggle articulated by labour unions and political parties. These movements were driven partly by the emerging history

of Stalinist repression, and when combined with the Soviet regime's suppression of democratising currents in Eastern Europe, this meant that communist parties were increasingly discredited in the eyes of young European leftists. This called into question the strategic validity of the Leninist programme of state-takeover by a revolutionary party leading a coalition of forces centred on the industrial working class.<sup>33</sup> If even 'successful' revolutions led to sclerotic technocracy and political repression in the long term, what then was to be the properly emancipatory course of action? Hierarchy and vanguardism in the communist party increasingly appeared opposed to the aims of the emerging social movements.

Beyond the difficulties of transitioning to postcapitalism under a communist administration, the prospects for state-takeover in the developed nations in the 1960s and 1970s seemed slight, especially given the divisions emerging on the left. The uprisings in France in May 1968, in which the French Communist Party notably failed to back the unionists and student groups, seemingly brought to an end any prospect of a political revolution. In addition, social democracy and its Keynesian-corporatist solutions to social inequality appeared increasingly content with the existing order, and unable or unwilling to move towards an emancipatory socialism. Though social democracy was capable of offering significant gains to certain groups, it retained an authoritarian establishment and a paternalistic cast, generally exclusive of women and ethnic minorities, and was dependent upon a mode of capitalist organisation (Fordism) that generated unusual levels of social cohesion. It was this social cohesion that was eroded in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the emergence of new mass desires (for increased flexibility in work, for example) and newly insistent demands (for racial and gender equality, for nuclear disarmament, for sexual freedoms, and against Western imperialism). By the late 1960s, these new problems could no longer be resolved with the existing set of leftist political agents, and electoral pressures were beginning to transform the social democratic party from a mass party of the working class into an increasingly coalition-based party of the middle class.<sup>34</sup> The remaining radical elements of social democratic parties were being slowly hollowed out.

The ongoing decline of the party form can be traced partly to the disastrous realities of rule in the nominally communist states and the disappointment of social democracy. At the same time, a series of well-founded critiques

were marshalled from within the new left, prompted partly by the experiences of women in activist groups, who found their voices continued to be marginalised even in allegedly radical organisations. More hierarchical organisational forms, such as parties or traditional union organisations, continued to entrench the predominant patriarchal and sexist social relations prevalent in broader society. Considerable experimentation was therefore conducted to produce new organisational forms that could work against this social repression. This included the use of consensus decision-making and horizontal debating structures that would later come to worldwide fame with the Occupy Wall Street movement.<sup>35</sup> Outside of feminist groups, the new student left of the university campuses, while diverse in its manifestations, was often explicitly anti-authoritarian, anti-bureaucratic, and even anti-organisational.<sup>36</sup> Many of the tactics espoused by these groups emphasised the benefits of direct action and drew their influences from African-American civil rights movements and earlier student movements, as well as from the ideas of European Situationism, anarchist political currents, and the incipient environmental movement.<sup>37</sup> Here we can see the emergence of folk politics' basic strategic orientation and the modes of action that characterise it: from the occupation, sit-in, or squatted commune, through to carnivalesque street protests and 'happenings'. Each of these tactics emerged in this period as a way to disrupt the functioning of everyday power; suspend the 'normal' forms of social regulation and promote egalitarian spaces for discussion. Beyond trying to change society, these interventions aimed at transforming the participants themselves and embodying the new forms of sociality to come.

The movements that crystallised in the period were therefore diverse in their makeup and outlook, operating across various subjectivities, territorial locations, and tactical and strategic forms. But each of them, in its own way, articulated new desires that could not readily be accommodated within the old forms of left-wing politics. One way to consider these movements is as part of a generalised 'antisystemic' political phenomenon of the time.<sup>38</sup> Across the globe, there was a tendency towards challenging and taking apart the power of bureaucratic hierarchies in favour of new modes of direct action, extending from the student, feminist and black power movements of the United States, through to the Situationist movement, student and allied labour movements of Europe, Prague's

anti-Stalinists, the student revolts of Mexico and Tokyo, and China's Cultural Revolution.<sup>39</sup> At its most extreme, however; this antisystemic politics led towards the identification of political power as *inherently* tainted by oppressive, patriarchal and domineering tendencies.<sup>40</sup> This leaves something of a paradox. On the one hand, it could choose some form of negotiation or accommodation with existing power structures, which would tend towards the corruption or co-optation of the new left. But on the other hand, it could choose to remain marginal, and thereby unable to transform those elements of society not already convinced of its agenda.<sup>41</sup> The critiques many of these antisystemic movements made of established forms of state, capitalist and old-left bureaucratic power were largely accurate. Yet antisystemic politics offered few resources to build a new movement capable of contending against capitalist hegemony.

The legacy of these social movements was therefore two-sided. The ideas, values and new desires articulated by them had a significant impact on a global level; the dissemination of feminist, anti-racist, gay-rights and anti-bureaucratic demands remains their strongest achievement. In this, they represented an absolutely necessary moment of self-critique by the left, and the legacy of folk-political tactics finds its appropriate historical conditions here. Simultaneously, however, an inability or lack of desire to turn the more radical sides of these projects into hegemonic ones also had important consequences for the period of destabilisation that followed.<sup>42</sup> While capable of generating an array of new and powerful ideas of human freedom, the new social movements were generally unable to replace the faltering social democratic order.

## OUTMANOEUVRED

Just as the new social movements were on the rise, the economic basis of the social democratic consensus was beginning to fall apart. The 1970s saw surging energy prices, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, the growth of global capital flows, persistent stagflation and falling capitalist profits.<sup>43</sup> This effectively ended the basic political settlement that had supported the post-war era: that unique nexus of Keynesian economic policy, Fordist–corporatist industrial production and the broadly social democratic consensus that returned a part of the social surplus back to workers. Across the world, the

structural crisis presented an opportunity for the forces of both the broad left and the broad right to generate a new hegemony that could resolve it.

For the right, the challenge was to restore capital accumulation and profitability. This challenge was eventually answered by the emergence of neoliberal thought on the global stage; but even before that, right-wing forces in the UK and the United States were experimenting with new ways to outmanoeuvre both the old and new left. One particularly important approach was a political-economic strategy to link the crisis of capitalism to union power. The subsequent defeat of organised labour throughout the core capitalist nations has perhaps been neoliberalism's most important achievement, significantly changing the balance of power between labour and capital. The means by which this was achieved were diverse, from physical confrontation and combat,<sup>44</sup> to using legislation to undermine solidarity and industrial action, to embracing shifts in production and distribution that compromised union power (such as disaggregating supply chains), to re-engineering public opinion and consent around a broadly neoliberal agenda of individual freedom and 'negative solidarities'. The latter denotes more than mere indifference to worker agitations – it is the fostering of an aggressively enraged sense of injustice, committed to the idea that, because I must endure increasingly austere working conditions (wage freezes, loss of benefits, a declining pension pot), then everyone else must as well. The result of these combined shifts was a hollowing-out of unions and the defeat of the working class in the developed world.<sup>45</sup>

While the right successfully faced the structural crisis by consolidating its political and economic power, the movements of the old and new left were unable to confront this new configuration of forces. In the 1970s, socialist and even communist political parties were gradually able to gain increasing ground in elections in Western Europe; but the old left simply tried to resolve the crisis by doubling down on the traditional corporatist agenda.<sup>46</sup> But the old Keynesian policy formulations were unable to kick-start growth, restrain unemployment or reduce inflation under these new economic conditions. As a result, left-wing governments coming to power in the 1970s, such as the British Labour Party, often ended up having to implement proto-neoliberal policies in frustrated attempts to foster a recovery.<sup>47</sup> The traditional labour movement, decrepit and stagnant, was by now being bested and co-opted by the forces of the right. In this context, the new left was a necessary critique

that was essential to the left's revitalisation and progress. Yet, as we saw in the previous section, if the old labour organisations were in many senses bereft of ideas, the new left was unable to institutionalise itself and articulate a counter-hegemony. The result was a left that became increasingly marginalised.

As neoliberalism expanded and consolidated its common sense; the remaining social democratic parties increasingly came to accept neoliberalism's terms. With most major parties effectively signed up to its political and economic programme, and increasing numbers of public services being taken into private hands, the ability to achieve significant change at the ballot box was dramatically reduced. Widespread cynicism began to accompany a hollowed-out party politics that came to resemble the public relations industry, with politicians being reduced to the role of shopkeepers hawking undesirable wares.<sup>48</sup> Mass participation in electoral politics declined in tandem with the gradual acceptance of the neoliberal coordinates, and the age of post-politics was upon us. Mass voter disaffection is the result today, with voter turnout routinely at historic lows. Under these circumstances, the folk-political insistence on immediate results and small-scale participatory democracy has an obvious allure.

The position of the new social movements in this context was more ambiguous. By the 1990s, the positioning of the working class as privileged political subject had been fully broken down, and a much wider array of social identities, desires and oppressions had gained recognition.<sup>49</sup> Increasingly sophisticated attempts were made to develop the analysis of interacting power structures, giving rise to ideas of intersectional oppressions.<sup>50</sup> As a result of cultural dissemination and mainstream political endorsement, large parts of the programmes of feminist, anti-racist and queer political movements had become enshrined in law and embraced on a social level. But despite these successes, there had been a rollback from the kind of radical demands outlined in the 1970s, which envisaged a much more thorough transformation of society. Feminists, for example, have made significant gains in terms of pay equality, abortion rights and childcare policies, but these pale in comparison to projects for the total abolition of gender.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, for many black liberation movements, while anti-racist employment policies and anti-discrimination laws were widely enacted, they had not been accompanied by other radical programmes espoused by earlier movements.<sup>52</sup> Much of the success seen by the new social movements today is confined within the

hegemonic terms established by neoliberalism – articulated around market-centred claims, liberal rights and a rhetoric of choice. What have been sidelined in the process are the more radical and anti-capitalist elements of these projects.

Looking back, we have the collapse of the traditional organisations of the left, and the simultaneous rise of an alternative new left predicated upon critiques of bureaucracy, verticality, exclusion and institutionalisation, combined with an incorporation of some of the new desires into the apparatus of neoliberalism. It was against this backdrop that folk-political intuitions increasingly sedimented as a new common sense and came to be expressed in the alter-globalisation movements.<sup>53</sup> These movements emerged in two phases. The first, appearing from the mid 1990s through to the early 2000s, consisted of groups such as the Zapatistas, anti-capitalists, alter-globalisers, and participants in the World Social Forum and global anti-war protests. A second phase began immediately after the 2007–09 financial crisis and featured various groups united by their similar organisational forms and ideological positions, including the Occupy movement, Spain's 15M and various national-level student movements. Both phases of the newest social movements sought to counter neoliberalism and its national and corporate avatars, with the first phase targeting global trade and governance organizations, and the latter, focusing more on financialisation, inequality and debt.<sup>54</sup> Drawing influence from the earlier social movements, this latest cycle of struggles comprises groups that tend to privilege the local and the spontaneous, the horizontal and the anti-state. The apparent plausibility of folk politics rests on the collapse of traditional modes of organisation on the left, the co-optation of social democratic parties into a choice-less neoliberal hegemony, and the broad sense of disempowerment engendered by the insipidness of contemporary party politics. In a world where the most serious problems we face seem intractably complex, folk politics presents an alluring way to prefigure egalitarian futures in the present. On its own, however, this kind of politics is unable to give rise to long-lasting forces that might supersede, rather than merely resist, global capitalism.<sup>55</sup>

## LOOKING FORWARD

The critique of folk politics advanced in this book is as much a warning as it is a diagnosis.<sup>56</sup> The existing tendencies in the mainstream and radical left are

moving towards the folk-political pole, and we seek to reverse this trend. The aim of the first half of the book is therefore to disrupt an increasingly dogmatic set of principles about how to strategise and do politics today. Beginning with a critical take on existing politics, Chapter 2 seeks to diagnose and outline the limits of contemporary folk-political thinking. While the left has rejected the project of hegemony and expansion, Chapter 3 shows how neoliberalism successfully took the opposite path. In the place of folk politics, the second half will suggest an alternative leftist project organised around global and universal emancipation. Chapter 4 argues that a future-orientated left needs to reclaim the initiative for modernisation and its emphasis on progress and universal emancipation. Chapter 5 sets out an analysis of the tendencies of contemporary capitalism, emphasising the crisis of work and social reproduction. These tendencies demand a response, and our argument is that the left should begin mobilising a political project to direct these forces in a progressive manner. In contrast to today's dominant focus on debt and inequality, Chapter 6 envisions a post-work world. Chapters 7 and 8 examine some of the steps that will need to be taken to achieve this vision, which include building a counter-hegemonic movement and rebuilding the capacities of the left. Finally, the Conclusion takes a step back to examine the project of modernity from the perspective of a future-orientated left guided by the goal of universal emancipation. This book is predicated on a simple belief – that a modern left can neither continue with the current system nor return to an idealised past, but must instead face up to the task of building a new future.



## **Chapter 2**

# **Why Aren't We Winning? A Critique of Today's Left**

*Goldman Sachs doesn't care if you raise chickens.*

Jodi Dean

A key challenge facing the left today is to reckon with the disappointments and failures of the most recent cycle of struggles. From the anti-globalisation to the Occupy movements, we have seen a high point of folk-political practice. Why, despite a considerable mobilisation of people and passions, did these movements fail to achieve any significant change in the political status quo? Some writers have argued that the incapacity of contemporary leftist movements can be explained by their class basis, such as their alleged lack of a working-class component, or the infiltration of reformist liberal interests.<sup>1</sup> Others have argued that the problem lies with the nature of the system and the hurdles placed in front of any transformative project. Yet as we argued last chapter, this only partly explains the recent failures. By contrast, the argument of this chapter is that the problems lie more with the folk-political assumptions that shape the strategic horizon of recent left politics. We seek here to diagnose the limits posed by contemporary folk politics.

As was argued in Chapter 1, folk politics emerges at the junction between a generalised reaction to increasing social complexity and a specific history of leftist movements in the twentieth century. This chapter examines how

the folk-political intuitions that were formed in the process have come to shape some of the dominant strands of contemporary leftist politics. We make no claim to cover the entire field of social movements here, but simply focus on what have been the most politically popular and significant moments of the radical left in the past fifteen years. We also do not claim that any of the particular political tactics used by these movements are inherently problematic. The merits of particular tactics are only legible when seen in the context of both the broader historical horizon and the strategy aimed at transforming it. It is in our current setting – of a world overwhelmingly determined by the imperatives of global capitalism, combined with folk-political strategies focused on the local and the spontaneous – that we locate the fundamental weakness of the contemporary left. We begin by examining one of the most popular political tendencies of the past fifteen years – horizontalism – before turning to widespread ideas centred on localism, and the general reactive thrust of most mainstream and radical leftist politics.

## HORIZONTALISM

Crystallising in 1970s US social movements and thrust into prominence by the Zapatistas, alter-globalisation activists and the movement of the squares, horizontalism has become the dominant strand of today's radical left.<sup>2</sup> Responding to the twentieth-century failures of state-led political change, horizontalist movements instead advocate changing the world by changing social relations from below.<sup>3</sup> They draw upon a long tradition of theory and practice in anarchism, council communism, libertarian communism and autonomism, in order to – in the words of one proponent – change the world without taking power.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of these movements lies a rejection of the state and other formal institutions, and a privileging of society as the space from which radical change will emerge. Horizontalism rejects the project of hegemony as intrinsically domineering, putting forth an affinity-based politics in its stead.<sup>5</sup> Rather than advocating an appeal to or takeover of the vertical power of the state, horizontalism argues for freely associating individuals to come together, create their own autonomous communities and govern their own lives. In broad terms, we can summarise these ideas in terms of four major commitments:

1. A rejection of all forms of domination
2. An adherence to direct democracy and/or consensus decision-making<sup>6</sup>
3. A commitment to prefigurative politics
4. An emphasis on direct action

Embedded within this set of commitments is a series of problems that constrain and limit their potential in the struggle against global capitalism.

Horizontalism's focus on domination in all its forms is perhaps its signal contribution.<sup>7</sup> Moving beyond the old left's traditional focus on the state and capital, it emphasises the various ways in which other types of domination continue to structure society (racial, patriarchal, sexual, ableist, and so on). It is a significant advance that many of today's radical left have adopted these ideas and centred their practice upon the complete removal of all forms of oppression – a commitment that we believe any serious leftist politics must adopt. Yet the means by which horizontalist movements attempt to overcome domination and oppression often end up being bound by the limits of folk politics. In seeking the direct and unmediated cancellation of social relations of domination, these movements either tend to ignore the more subtle forms of domination that persist, or else fail to construct persistent political structures able to maintain the new social relations in the long term.

The commitment to avoiding all forms of domination is closely tied to a critique of representation – both conceptual and political. In practice, this has led to a rejection of the more hierarchical structures that characterise representative politics.<sup>8</sup> Having experienced the history of corrupt trade unions and rapidly eroded liberal democracies, representation is seen as inevitably leading to self-serving and dominant elites. These structures are to be replaced by direct forms of democracy that privilege immediacy over mediation, invoking a more personal sense of politics.<sup>9</sup> The idea here is that a 'face-to-face democracy' is presumably more natural and authentic, and less prone to the emergence of hierarchies.<sup>10</sup> Political decisions are to be made not by representatives, but instead by individuals representing themselves in person.<sup>11</sup> Direct democracy ends up being taken as a basic value, underpinned by the folk-political intuition that what is immediate is better than what is mediated. Rather than majority rule, parliamentary procedure, or dictates from a central committee, it is consensus that is often the major aim of discussions.<sup>12</sup> Debate and governance should therefore be maximally

inclusive, and the process of deliberation itself, as opposed to just its outcomes, is something to be valued.<sup>13</sup> Participatory democracy is understandably a major attraction for many people, particularly in light of the empty, ritualistic gestures of contemporary representative democracies.<sup>14</sup> Many participants speak of the feelings of empowerment they derive from participating in consensus decision-making processes.<sup>15</sup> Maximal inclusivity and consensus are therefore valorised, and the importance of tactics and process is placed above strategic objectives.

Direct democracy, consensus and inclusivity all form part of horizontalism's commitments to prefigurative politics, which aims to create in the here-and-now the world they would like to see. Prefigurative politics is a longstanding tradition on the left, from the anarchism of Kropotkin and Bakunin onwards, but it has only recently come to characterise the leading edges of left-wing politics. The earlier promise that, after the revolution, hierarchies and exclusions would evaporate was little consolation to the women and people of colour whose concerns were ignored by yet another white male leader. Rather than wait for a purported revolution, prefigurative politics attempts to instantiate a new world immediately – again relying on an implicit sense that immediacy is inherently superior to more mediated approaches. At its best, prefigurative politics attempts to embody utopian impulses in bringing the future into concrete existence today.<sup>16</sup> Yet at its worst, an insistence on prefiguration becomes a dogmatic assertion that the means must match the ends, accompanied by ignorance of the structural forces set against it.<sup>17</sup>

If the aim is to create the world we want in the ~~here~~ and-now, and if recourse to mediating institutions is forbidden (or at least disavowed), then the appropriate form of practice has to be direct action. This is a form of practice that encompasses a wide range of possible tactics, ranging from theatrical protests in the vein of the Situationists, to wildcat strikes, to blockading ports, to burning down luxury housing developments. In these practices we can again see hints of folk politics – the privileging of the direct, the immediate and the intuitive. To be sure, direct action can sometimes be more effective and useful than protests – such as pouring concrete to destroy anti-homeless spikes, or using slow-down methods in workplace struggles.<sup>18</sup> Yet, as we will see, direct action often remains insufficient to secure long-standing change, and in isolation, is typically only a temporary impediment to the powers of state and capital.

Direct democracy, prefigurative politics and direct action are not, we hasten to add, intrinsically flawed.<sup>19</sup> Rather than being denounced in themselves, their utility needs to be judged relative to particular historical situations and particular strategic objectives – in terms of their ability to exert real power to create genuine lasting transformation. The reality of complex, globalised capitalism is that small interventions consisting of relatively non-scalable actions are highly unlikely to ever be able to reorganise our socioeconomic system. As we suggest in the second half of this book, the tactical repertoire of horizontalism can have some use, but only when coupled with other more mediated forms of political organisation and action. Following this broad overview of horizontalism's theoretical commitments and the general issues associated with them, we can now turn to two important sequences in twenty-first-century politics to highlight both the practical possibilities and the strong folk-political limits built into these models. In what follows, we examine two of the strongest cases for horizontalism: the Occupy movement emerging after the 2008 financial crisis and the Argentinean experience in the wake of the country's 2001 default. In each case, we can see both the real successes and the palpable limits of these approaches.

## **Occupy**

The most significant recent embodiment of horizontalist principles occurred in the 'movement of the squares'. While occupations do not require horizontalist governance (indeed, the precursors to the tactic originally came from the military),<sup>20</sup> the vast majority of post-2008 occupations have been organised along such lines. This wave of occupations of public spaces spread rapidly to over 950 cities worldwide in 2011, each inflected with local political, economic, cultural and class concerns. Here we want to examine the failure of the Occupy movement in the Western world, in particular because it highlights the deficiencies of folk-political thinking in the core capitalist countries.<sup>21</sup> Notably, this failure occurred despite the vast range of approaches subsumed under the name of Occupy. In the United States, for example, from Occupy Wall Street to Occupy Oakland, this movement ranged from the dogmatically non-violent to the openly antagonistic, between an often confused liberalism and a militant libertarian communism.<sup>22</sup> Adding to this regional variation was the mixed ideological make-up of the participants, which spanned the political spectrum and included reformist liberals,

anti-capitalists, insurrectionist anarchists, anti-state communists and union activists, along with a smattering of anti-Federal Reserve libertarians. In addition to this diversity, there was widespread resistance to the articulation of political demands, making the unity of the movement even more difficult to discern.

It is relatively easy to see why so many were motivated to join the movement. The horizontalist nature of Occupy gave people a means to express themselves in the face of societies that barely registered their voices.<sup>23</sup> Particularly in America, the structure of electoral democracy around two large parties has meant the window of political discourse has become incredibly narrow. The assortment of slogans and causes associated with Occupy testifies to an explosion of suppressed anger and a proliferation of political demands that otherwise went unheard. Even among those who did not directly participate in the occupations, Occupy provided a platform for the excluded in websites such as the 'We are the 99 Percent' Tumblr, with a chorus of voices protesting against economic immiseration and social exclusion.<sup>24</sup> Beyond any direct political result, the opportunity for the frustrations of the excluded to be publicly aired was inspiring and empowering for many.

Occupy also worked to disrupt the ordinary lives of both participants and observers, and allowed people to participate together in a shared political project. In the words of one observer, 'the practice of autonomy provides a lesson in one's own power'.<sup>25</sup> In places such as Oakland, activists frequently pushed towards more radical politics than the usual mediating organisations (such as non-profits) would have allowed. Occupy functioned, like many protest movements, as a way to radicalise those who were involved, especially when they were faced with disproportionately brutal police responses. Occupations were purported to prefigure a new world; but even if that new world has yet to emerge, the movements certainly showed participants what was possible with political solidarity.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond these internal benefits, occupied spaces functioned as bases for actions against the political system (as in protest camps against the G8).<sup>27</sup> The majority of these actions consisted of protest marches and rallies, with the spaces also operating as physical locations for collective decision-making. In relation to external actions, occupied spaces also worked as headquarters for skills training – for example, carrying out acts of civil disobedience, dealing with police repression or providing information on legal rights.<sup>28</sup> In a general

sense, occupations worked as the most obvious real-world manifestation of the infrastructure for the overall movement. The occupations were also (though not always) a place for supporting the most marginal sections of society, particularly the homeless.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the occupations provided an insistent focal point for media attention – particularly the Zuccotti Park occupation in New York – and brought many otherwise sidelined issues to the attention of the government and the wider public.<sup>30</sup> At least for a limited time, Occupy was able to draw significant mainstream press and television news attention to issues of economic justice – a real achievement in a heavily neoliberalised media environment.

But despite these successes, there are important ways in which the occupations failed. Numerous commentators from within the movement have already noted a number of these, including the ways in which Occupy's rhetoric of inclusivity hid a series of exclusions based on race, gender, income and free time.<sup>31</sup> Folk-political constraints were contained in the practices and ideas of the movement, and it was these tendencies that ultimately left it incapable of expanding spatially, consolidating temporally or universalising itself. To be sure, some of the movements that made up Occupy had no intention of scaling up, persisting in time or universalising themselves. Many (though not all) horizontalist thinkers place an emphasis on the particular dynamism of relatively short-lived, spontaneous politics, holding that 'relative permanence is not necessarily a virtue'.<sup>32</sup> But whether intended or not, the movement's tendency in practice to prioritise spatial, temporal and conceptual immediacy weakened it collectively, leaving it unable to persist long enough to have a chance of seriously pursuing its basic objectives.

Drawing upon horizontalist principles, the Occupy movement was characterised chiefly by its adherence to direct democracy. While direct democracy can exist in a variety of different forms – from workers' councils to Swiss-style canton democracy – under Occupy it took the general assembly as the dominant organisational form.<sup>33</sup> In an era of declining democratic effectiveness, a new way of doing democracy was one of the most common aspirations articulated by participants in these protests.<sup>34</sup> Still, when fetishised as an end in itself, direct democracy inexorably imposes significant constraints. In the first place, the level of effort and involvement in politics that direct democracy demands leads to problems of sustainability. The participatory economics (Parecon) project, for instance, envisions direct democracy at every level of

society; but this vision for a postcapitalist world translates into endlessly ramifying staff meetings over every detail of life – hardly the inspiring stuff of utopian visions.<sup>35</sup> Under Occupy, many general assemblies devolved into similar situations in which even the most mundane of issues had to be painstakingly addressed by a collective.<sup>36</sup> The acrimonious debates over drummers making too much noise in the Zuccotti Park occupation are just one particularly farcical example of this. The more general point is that direct democracy requires a significant amount of participation and effort – in other words, it entails increasing amounts of work. During brief moments of revolutionary enthusiasm, this extra work can become inconsequential; yet after the return to normality it is simply added to the ordinary pressures of everyday life.<sup>37</sup> The extra work of direct democracy is problematic especially because of the constitutive exclusions it entails – particularly for those who are unable to attend physically, those who do not feel comfortable in large groups and those who lack public speaking skills (with all the gendered and racialised biases inherent to these factors).<sup>38</sup> As the Occupy movement went on, the general assemblies simply collapsed, often under the weight of exhaustion and boredom. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that the problem of democracy today is not that people want a say over every single aspect of their lives. The real issue of democratic deficit is that the *most significant* decisions of society are out of the hands of the average person.<sup>39</sup> Direct democracy responds to this problem, but attempts to solve it by making democracy an immediate and bodily experience that rejects mediation. Similar preferences for immediacy in democracy also hold back its ~~spatial~~ scalability. To put it simply, direct democracy requires small communities. It is notable that the hundreds of thousands in Tahrir Square in Egypt did not have a general assembly, and that even at Occupy Wall Street, the general assembly consisted of only a small proportion of the total number of participants.<sup>40</sup> The very mechanisms and ideals of direct democracy (face-to-face discussion) make it difficult for it to exist beyond small communities, and make it virtually impossible to respond to problems of national, regional and global democracy. The spatial constraints of direct democracy also overlook the regressive aspects of small communities. These ‘intimate’ communities are often home to the most virulent forms of xenophobia, homophobia, racism, pernicious gossip, and all other varieties of backward thinking. Small communities of the kind required by direct democracy are not a suitable goal for a modern left

movement. Moreover, participative democracy might well be constructed without them, particularly using the communications technologies available today.

Another folk-political constraint emerged with the emphasis on consensus as a basic goal of the process. The aim of consensus is to reach a decision that is acceptable to everyone, again reliant upon spatial immediacy. As anarchist David Graeber notes, 'It is much easier, in a face-to-face community, to figure out what most members of that community want to do, than to figure out how to convince those who do not go along with it.'<sup>41</sup> Yet what works well on one scale (the face-to-face community) is much more difficult to make work on larger ones. Perhaps inevitably in the case of a relatively diffuse movement such as Occupy, consensus decision-making led to a lowest-common-denominator set of demands, where they emerged at all. There was also much rhetoric glorifying the absence of determinate demands as somehow radical. These arguments from within the movement identified the making of demands as alienating and divisive, as potentially reducing the role of the movement by appealing to outside powers – such as the state – and hence liable to lead towards the co-optation of the movement.<sup>42</sup> As critics of such views have argued, however, the divisive nature of demands is also a positive: while putting some participants off, they may equally mobilise those committed to achieving the demand in question. Moreover, they work to clarify the real political differences contained in the movement – differences often elided in practice, even where they might prove to be insurmountable.<sup>43</sup>

Further problems with Occupy emerged with its nominal rejection of any forms of organisational verticality. Most notably, this led to problems emerging in the relations between the movement and other similarly minded groups. Whereas the movement of the squares in Egypt and Tunisia built strong connections with existing labour movements, the Western world's Occupy movement largely rejected such associations.<sup>44</sup> This led to three tendencies. The first was a frequently paralysing decisional structure. When actions were taken by Occupy, they often came from a sub-group acting on their own, rather than from the general assembly making a consensus decision.<sup>45</sup> Actions, in other words, did not come from horizontalism. Second, evidence shows that hierarchical organisations are crucial in defending movements against the state. In Occupy, the maintenance of the occupied space against police repression was the result, not of horizontalism, but of vertical

institutions that mobilised their members to support the occupation.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in Egypt, football supporters and religious organisations were central to the defence of Tahrir Square against the violence of the state and reactionaries.<sup>47</sup> Finally, the rejection of verticality in all its forms meant a key mechanism for spatially and temporally expanding the movement was abandoned. Links to labour, social justice, and even political parties would have provided an infrastructure for Occupy to move beyond folk-political parameters. Organised workers, for instance, were crucial in Egypt for turning the general protest into a near general strike, shutting down the country as a result and providing the final blow to the Mubarak regime.<sup>48</sup> Links to political parties have also helped occupations in Iceland, Greece and Spain produce much broader successes. In the end, despite the clear desire to spread Occupy's ideas – and the real success in garnering public attention – the moves necessary to transform the social fabric were never taken.

More fundamentally, though, Occupy constrained itself by enforcing a rigidly prefigurative politics. The basic prefigurative gesture is to embody the future world immediately – to change our ways of relating to each other in order to live the postcapitalist future in the present. The role of occupations is a classic example of this: they often self-consciously aim to enact the space of a non-capitalist world through mutual aid, rejections of hierarchy and rigorous direct democracy. Yet these spaces are understood and built as explicitly temporary – not spaces for sustained change or the working-out of concrete alternatives, let alone ambitious competitors to global capitalism. Instead they are short-term spaces containing the ~~transitory~~ experiences of an immediate community.<sup>49</sup> A pamphlet from a precursor to the Occupy movement makes this particularly clear:

[Students who insisted on no demands] saw the point of occupation as the creation of a momentary opening in capitalist time and space, a rearrangement that sketched the contours of a new society. We side with this anti-reformist position. While we know these free zones will be partial and transitory, the tensions they expose between the real and the possible can push the struggle in a more radical direction.<sup>50</sup>

The acknowledgement that the occupation will be temporary is here combined with a naive belief that maybe this time it will spark a radical

change. Prefigurative spaces face a continuous struggle against dissolution for good reasons. First, they require a variety of logistical supports, including housing, food, sanitation, healthcare, defence and legal advice. Most of this does not come from within the prefigurative community, but instead relies upon existing capitalist networks.<sup>51</sup> The social reproduction of encampments is difficult even under the most favourable conditions, and even established utopian communities (often religious in nature) typically find it impossible to remain independent and self-sustaining.<sup>52</sup> Second, prefigurative spaces are often subject to state and corporate repression – and if they are not, it is typically because they pose no threat to the existing social order. The Zapatistas, for example, are permitted to exist in relative freedom simply because the state and capital do not see them as a threat.<sup>53</sup> The moment a prefigurative space becomes a threat is the moment when repression weighs down on it, and when its fetishisation of horizontalism becomes a serious liability. Prefigurative politics, at its worst, therefore ignores the forces aligned against the creation and expansion of a new world. The simple positing and practising of a new world is insufficient to overcome these forces, as the repression faced by Occupy demonstrated.<sup>54</sup>

The immediate question that must be asked of any prefigurative politics is therefore: How can it be expanded and scaled up?<sup>55</sup> Even granting the problematic assumption that most people would want to live as the Occupy camps did, what efforts might be possible to physically and socially expand these spaces? When theorists face up to this question, vague hand-waving usually ensues: moments will purportedly ‘resonate’ with each other; small everyday actions will somehow make a qualitative shift to ‘crack open’ society; riots and blockades will ‘spread and multiply’; experiences will ‘contaminate’ participants and expand; pockets of prefigurative resistance will just ‘spontaneously erupt’.<sup>56</sup> In any case, the difficult task of traversing from the particular to the universal, from the local to the global, from the temporary to the permanent, is elided by wishful thinking. The strategic imperatives to expand, extend and universalise are left unfulfilled.

If Occupy was unsuccessful in expanding prefigurative spaces beyond the margins of society, these protest camps could still be useful as launching pads for direct action. Indeed, one of the most notable achievements of the Occupy movement was to establish a social and physical infrastructure that could act as a foundation for direct actions. In countries like Greece and Spain, debt

strikes have been organised and picket lines formed for workers without the right to strike. Other Occupy movements supported squatters, provided food for the homeless, set up pirate media, mobilised to prevent evictions, protested against government cuts and provided humanitarian relief after natural disasters. But the influence of Occupy should not be overstated. For instance, many of the successful eviction and foreclosure movements have been extensions of pre-existing work done by movements such as the black activist-led Take Back the Land.<sup>57</sup> More broadly, the problem is that direct actions generally act on surface effects, patching the wounds of capitalism but leaving the underlying problems and structures intact. Foreclosures continue apace, consumer debt rises to new heights, workers are thrown out into the streets, and the homeless population surges. In the case of Occupy, what became apparent was the limits of a propaganda of the deed.<sup>58</sup> While direct action can have real successes, it remains localised and temporary, and in this it remains folk-political. Direct action can be effective in mitigating the worst excesses of capitalism, but it can never address the difficult problem of attacking a globally dispersed *abstraction*, often focusing instead on intuitive targets.<sup>59</sup> The project of an expansive left – a left aiming to transform capitalism in fundamental ways – remains absent.

The image of Occupy that emerges here is of a movement that was wedded to certain assumptions about the benefits of local spaces, small communities, direct democracy and temporary autonomy at the margins of society. In turn, these beliefs rendered the movement incapable of expanding spatially, establishing sustainable ~~transformations~~ and universalising itself. The Occupy movements achieved real victories in creating solidarity, giving a voice to disenchanted and marginalised people, and raising public awareness. But they nevertheless remained an archipelago of prefigurative islands, surrounded by an implacably hostile capitalist environment. The proximate cause for the movement's failure was state repression, in the form of police clad in riot gear ruthlessly clearing the occupied spaces across the United States. But the structural causes were built into the assumptions and practices of the movement. Without the central focus of the occupied spaces, the movement dispersed and fragmented. Ultimately, the organisational form of these movements could not overcome the problems of scalability and construct a form of persistent power capable of effectively resisting the inevitable reaction from the state.

What may work quite well on one scale – perhaps up to a hundred people – becomes increasingly difficult to operate effectively when extended beyond that.<sup>60</sup> If a truly ambitious left politics is to take on global actors – the neoliberal capitalist system and its governing institutions, leading governments and their armies and police forces, and an entire planet's worth of corporations and financial entities – then operating beyond the merely local is essential. While there is certainly much to learn from these movements, it is our contention that, on their own, they will remain ineffective at bringing about large-scale change.

### **Argentina**

If any case from recent history offers hope for the sufficiency of horizontalism, it would appear to be Argentina, which achieved a large-scale national turn towards horizontalism and expansive worker control over factories. Yet a brief look at the Argentinean experience actually reveals new dimensions to the limits of folk-political approaches. In Argentina's circumstances, the immediate imperative for new social organisations came from the collapse of the national economy. Struck by a massive recession in 1998, the economy buckled and lost over a quarter of its GDP by 2002. Tensions reached a peak in December 2001, with government restrictions and financial chaos provoking the people into mass protests. The result was the collapse of the government and an eventual default on their debts. With the government both unable and unwilling to help its population, people were forced to find new ways to provide for themselves.

In the wake of these challenges, many of the Argentinean people took it upon themselves to self-organise and create new political and economic structures. To a significant degree, these responses were organised around explicitly horizontalist principles.<sup>61</sup> As with Occupy, there are a variety of benefits that can be identified in the horizontalist organising of Argentina. Perhaps most importantly, these movements were able to disrupt the common-sense norms of neoliberal society, moving beyond market individualism and negative solidarity. The fostering of bonds between individuals helped to overcome the antagonism that most protests and strikes often face from other parts of society. Like Occupy, but on a broader scale, Argentina's horizontal movements were also quickly able to provide the means for social reproduction under crisis conditions.<sup>62</sup>

But while these experiments with horizontalism brought about a number of achievements, its experience also revealed several further problems. Principal among these is the limitations faced by neighbourhood assemblies as an organisational form. Modelled on horizontalist principles, the neighbourhood assemblies arose in response to the immediate needs and possibilities opened up by the crisis. Like the general assembly of Occupy, they enabled people to have a newfound voice. But even when joined together in inter-neighbourhood assemblies, they never approached the point of replacing the state, or of being able to present themselves as a viable alternative. The functions of the state – welfare, healthcare, redistribution, education, and so on – were not about to be replaced by the horizontalist movement, even at its height of participation. It thus remained a localised response to the crisis. Further limitations surfaced as these assemblies could only function by either rejecting organised – which is to say, collective – interests, or incorporating them, and thus being overwhelmed.<sup>63</sup> Collective interests were incapable of being brought into the decision-making process without breaking it, since they often took control over discussion and debate. Problematically, these assemblies operated best on an individualistic basis.

Other organisational experiments in Argentina involved the spread of worker-controlled factories. In the wake of the economic crisis, some shuttered businesses were taken over and maintained by their employees. These factories helped to keep workers in jobs, and there is some evidence that they provided better pay for their workers. Unfortunately, despite the attention given to them, the total number of people involved was relatively small. At the most optimistic estimates, there were around 250 factories incorporating just under 10,000 workers.<sup>64</sup> With a labour force of over 18 million, this means far less than 0.1 per cent of the economy was participating in worker-controlled factories. Not only were these factories a minor part of the overall economy, but they also remained necessarily embedded within capitalist social relations. The dream of escape is just that: a dream. Tied to the imperative to create a profit, worker-controlled businesses can be just as oppressive and environmentally damaging as any large-scale business, but without the efficiencies of scale. Such problems are widespread across the worker-cooperative experience, having arisen not only in Argentina, but also in the Zapatista model and across America.<sup>65</sup>

Beyond these organisational limits, the key problem with Argentina as a model for postcapitalism is that it was simply a salve for the problems of

capitalism, not an alternative to it. As the economy started to improve, participation in the neighbourhood assemblies and alternative economies drastically declined.<sup>66</sup> The post-crisis horizontalist movements in Argentina were built as an emergency response to the collapse of the existing order, not as a competitor to a relatively well-functioning order. Indeed, the more widespread problem with contemporary horizontalism is that it often sees emergency situations – in the wake of a hurricane, earthquake or economic meltdown – as representative of a better world.<sup>67</sup> It is a struggle, to say the least, to see how post-disaster conditions are an improvement for the vast majority of the world's population. A politics that finds its best expression in the breakdown of social and economic order is not an alternative, so much as a knee-jerk survival instinct. Equally problematic is the tendency for horizontalists to find political potential in the mundane ways we organise horizontally in everyday life – friends gathering together, parties, festivals, and so on.<sup>68</sup> The problem is that such modes of organising are not scalable beyond a small community – and, more to the point, are not useful for certain political goals. As the Argentinean example shows, these modes of organising can be valuable for basic neighbourhood survival and for creating a sense of solidarity between people. But horizontalism struggles to compete against more organised interests, to sustain itself once a base level of normality returns, and to achieve long-term and large-scale political goals such as providing universal healthcare, high-level education and social security. These approaches remain useful in exceptional circumstances and for a small range of goals, but they will neither revolutionise society nor genuinely threaten global capitalism.

In the case of both neighbourhood assemblies and worker-controlled factories, we see that the primary organisational models of horizontalism are insufficient. They are often reactive tactics that fail to compete in the antagonistic environment of global capitalism. On a theoretical level, and in the actual experiences of Occupy and Argentina, the limits of horizontalism have repeatedly been made clear over the past decade. While recognising the important capacity of horizontalist tactics to provide small-scale support to communities and to temporarily disrupt certain exploitative practices, the commitment to fetishised versions of consensus, direct action, and particularly prefigurative politics, constrains the possibilities of expanding and overtaking existing social systems.

## LOCALISM

Less politically radical than horizontalism, though no less ubiquitous, is localism. As an ideology, localism extends far beyond the left, inflecting the politics of pro-capitalists, anti-capitalists, radicals and mainstream culture alike, as a new kind of political common sense. Shared between all of these is a belief that the abstraction and sheer scale of the modern world is at the root of our present political, ecological and economic problems, and that the solution therefore lies in adopting a ‘small is beautiful’ approach to the world.<sup>69</sup> Small-scale actions, local economies, immediate communities, face-to-face interaction – all of these responses characterise the localist worldview. In a time when most of the political strategies and tactics developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appear blunted and ineffectual, localism has a seductive logic to it. In all its diverse variants, from centre-right communitarianism<sup>70</sup> to ethical consumerism,<sup>71</sup> developmental microloans, and contemporary anarchist practice,<sup>72</sup> the promise it offers to do something concrete, enabling political action with immediately noticeable effects, is empowering on an individual level. But this sense of empowerment can be misleading. The problem with localism is that, in attempting to reduce large-scale systemic problems to the more manageable sphere of the local community, it effectively denies the systemically interconnected nature of today’s world. Problems such as global exploitation, planetary climate change, rising surplus populations, and the repeated crises of capitalism are abstract in appearance, complex in structure, and non-localised. Though they touch upon every locality, they are never fully manifested in any particular region. Fundamentally, these are systemic and abstract problems, requiring systemic and abstract responses.

While much of the populist localism on the right can easily be dismissed as regressive macho fantasy (for example, secessionist libertarianism), sinister ideological cover for austerity economics (the UK Conservative Party’s ‘Big Society’) or downright racist (the nationalist or fascist blaming of immigrants for structural economic problems), the localism of the left has been less thoroughly scrutinised. Though undoubtedly well-meaning, both the radical and mainstream left partake in localist politics and economics to their detriment. In what follows we will critically examine two of the more popular variants – local food and economic localism – which in very different areas exemplify the problematic dynamics of localism in general.

### **Local food**

With a cachet that reaches far beyond typical political circles, localism has recently come to dominate discussions of the production, distribution and consumption of food. Most influential here have been the interlinked movements known as 'slow food' and 'locavorism' (eating locally). The slow-food movement began in the mid 1980s in Italy, partly as a protest against the ever-increasing encroachment of fast-food chains. Slow food, as its name suggests, stands for everything McDonald's does not: local food, traditional recipes, slow eating and highly skilled production.<sup>73</sup> It is food that offers the most visceral embodiment of the benefits of the slow lifestyle, overcoming the vicissitudes of fast-paced capitalism by returning to an older culture of savouring meals and traditional production techniques.<sup>74</sup> But even its proponents admit that there are difficulties involved in living the slow-food lifestyle: 'Few of us have the time, money, energy or discipline to be a model Slow Foodie.'<sup>75</sup>

Without an assessment of how our lives are structured by social, political and economic pressures that make it easier to eat pre-prepared food than embrace the slow-food lifestyle, the end result is a variant of ethical consumerism with a hedonistic twist. It is patently correct that taking one's time to enjoy a well-prepared meal can be a pleasurable experience. Paying attention to a meal recasts the experience from one of pure utility into a more social and aesthetic experience. But there are structural reasons why we do not choose to do this often – reasons that are not the result of any individual moral failing. The structure of work, for example, is a primary reason why many of us are unable to enjoy slow eating, or meals prepared according to the ideals of the slow-food movement. Slow food might not always require money, but it always requires time. For those who have to work multiple jobs to support their families, time is at a premium. What is more, the gender politics of slow food are problematic, given that we live in patriarchal societies where the majority of food preparation is still presumed to be the task of wives and mothers.<sup>76</sup> While 'fast' food or pre-prepared meals might be unhealthy, their popularity enables the freeing up of women to live lives that are less marked by the everyday drudgery of feeding their families.<sup>77</sup> As innocent as it may at first seem, the slow-food movement, like many other forms of ethical consumerism, fails to think in large-scale terms about how its ideas might work within the broader context of rapacious capitalism.

Closely linked to the slow-food movement are locavorism and the ‘100-mile diet’ – a food politics that emphasises eating locally. Locavorism holds that locally sourced food is not only more likely to be healthy, but is also a vital component of our efforts to reduce carbon outputs, and hence our impact on the environment. It situates itself, therefore, as a response to a global issue. Moreover, locavorism claims to be one way to overcome the alienation of our relationship to food under capitalism. By eating food grown or produced in our locality, so this logic runs, we will be able to get back in touch with the production of our food and reclaim it from the dead hands of a capitalism that has run amok.<sup>78</sup> Compared to the slow-food movement, locavorism positions itself more explicitly, and politically, against globalisation. In doing so, it appeals to a constellation of folk-political ideas relating to the primacy of the local as a horizon of political action, and of the virtues of the local over the global, the immediate over the mediated, the simple over the complex.

These ideas condense often complex environmental issues into questions of *individual* ethics. One of the most serious (and intrinsically collective) crises of our times is thus effectively privatised. This personalised environmental ethic is exemplified in localist food politics – in particular, in the moral (and price) premium placed on locally grown food. Here we find ecologically motivated arguments (for reducing energy expenditure by reducing the distances over which food is transported, for example) combined with class differentiation (in the form of marketing designed to promote identification with organic food). Similarly, complex problems are condensed into poorly formulated shorthand. For instance, the idea of ‘food miles’ – identifying the distances that food products have travelled, so as to reduce carbon outputs – appears a reasonable one. The problem is that it is all too often taken to be sufficient on its own as a guide to ethical action. As a 2005 report by the UK’s Department of Agriculture and Food found, while the environmental impacts of transporting food were indeed considerable, a single indicator based on total food miles was inadequate as a measure of sustainability.<sup>79</sup> Most notably, the food-miles metric emphasises an aspect of food production that contributes a relatively small amount to overall carbon outputs. When it is simply assumed that ‘small is beautiful’, we can all too easily ignore the fact that the energy costs associated with producing food locally may well exceed the total costs of transporting it from a more suitable climate.<sup>80</sup> Even for the purpose of assessing the contribution of food

transportation, food miles are a poor metric. Air freight, for example, makes up a relatively small portion of total food miles, but it makes up a disproportionately large slice of total food-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.<sup>81</sup> The energy consumption involved in putting food on our plates is important, but it cannot be captured in anything as simple as food miles, or in the idea that 'local is best'. Indeed, highly inefficient local food production techniques may be more costly than efficiently grown globally sourced foodstuffs. The bigger question here relates to the priorities we place on the types of food we produce, how that production is controlled, who consumes that food and at what cost.

Localist food politics flattens the complexities it is trying to resolve into a simplistic binary: global, bad; local, good. What is needed, by contrast, are less simplistic ways of looking at complex problems – an analysis that takes into account the global food system as a whole, rather than intuitive short-hand formulae such as food miles, or 'organic' versus non-'organic' foods. It is likely that the ideal method of global food production will be some complex mixture of local initiatives, industrial farming practices, and global systems of distribution. It is equally likely that an analysis capable of calculating the best means to grow and distribute food lies outside the grasp of any individual consumer, requiring significant technical knowledge, collective effort and global coordination. None of this is well served by a culture that simply values the local.

### **Local economics**

Localism, in all its forms, represents an attempt to abjure the problems and politics of scale involved in large systems such as the global economy, politics and the environment. Our problems are increasingly systemic and global, and they require an equally systemic response. Action must always to some extent occur at the local level – and indeed some localist ideas, such as resiliency, can be useful. But localism-as-ideology goes much further, rejecting the systemic analysis that might guide and coordinate instances of local action to confront, oppose and potentially supplant oppressive instances of global power or looming planetary threats. Nowhere is the inability of localist solutions to challenge complex global problems more apparent than in movements towards localised business, banking and economics. Since the 2008 financial crisis, there have been a number of trends on the broad left towards

reforming our economic and monetary systems. While much of this work is useful, one prominent strand has focused on transforming economic systems through localisation. The problem with big business, so the thinking goes, is not so much its inherently exploitative nature but the scale of the enterprises involved. Smaller businesses and banks would supposedly be more reflective of the local community's needs.

One popular recent campaign, the 'move your money' movement, centred on the idea that, if it was the scale of banks that was to blame for the financial crisis, then customers ought to move their funds collectively to smaller, more virtuous institutions. Ethical-consumerist campaigns like this offer a semblance of effective action – they provide a meaningful narrative about the problems of the system and indicate the simple and pain-free action necessary to resolve it. As with most folk-political actions, it has all the appearances and feeling of having done something. Major banks are positioned as the bad guys, and individuals can supposedly produce significant effects just by moving their money into smaller, local banks and credit unions. What this model neglects is the complex abstractions of the modern banking system. Money circulates as immediately global and immediately interconnected with every other market. In any situation where a small bank or credit union has more deposits than it is able to profitably reinvest within its locality, it will inevitably seek investments within the broader financial system. Indeed, a reading of the accounts of smaller banks in the United States reveals that they partake in and contribute to the same global financial markets as everyone else – investing in Treasury, mortgage or corporate bonds while often participating in socially destructive lending practices that equal those of the major banks.<sup>82</sup> While clearly a reformist measure, 'move your money' might at least have been expected to lead to some transformations in the composition of the US banking system. However, as of September 2013, total assets held by the six largest US banks had increased by 37 per cent since the financial crisis. Indeed, by every available measure the big US banks are larger today than at the beginning of the crisis, holding 67 per cent of all assets in the US banking system.<sup>83</sup> And while legislative efforts across the world have made some attempts to impose restraints on the activities that led to the crisis (requiring increased capital asset ratios and regular 'stress tests' designed to avoid further bailouts), risky lending continues,<sup>84</sup> and risky derivatives holdings remain at staggeringly high levels.<sup>85</sup>

If localist efforts to constrain the size of the largest banks appear doomed to failure, what are we to make of alternative campaigns to replicate some of the local banks that make up much of the continental European banking system? For example, 70 per cent of the German banking sector consists of community or smaller-sized banks.<sup>86</sup> German and Swiss community banks, their proponents argue, pool risks collectively and are mutually owned, with high degrees of autonomy to take advantage of local knowledge, and as a result generally remained profitable throughout the financial crisis.<sup>87</sup> It is also argued that local banks of this type are more likely to lend to small businesses than the larger institutions that are more common in the United States and the UK. There are advantages to some local banking models, but their stability is often overstated. For example, despite being highly localised and under community control, Spain's community banks (the *cajas*) took significant risks in the property market and other speculative investments in the 2000s, necessitating thoroughgoing financial restructuring after the 2008 crisis. Though under the alleged control of boards with community representation, investment decisions were effectively taken with little proper oversight. Localisation here meant the politicisation of allegedly disinterested governance boards, turning some *cajas* into platforms for local government investment in speculative property schemes, as a culture of cronyism took hold.<sup>88</sup> With the worst of Spain's banking crisis centred on the local banks, restructuring meant the merging of local banks to form larger institutions. Even in Germany, often touted as having the best localised banking system in the world, there were issues with some regional banks. The Landesbanken, for example, were heavily invested in structured credit products that performed particularly poorly during the financial crisis.<sup>89</sup> The lesson to draw from this is that there is nothing inherent in smaller institutions that will enable them to resist the worst excesses of contemporary finance – and that the idea of cleanly separating the local from the global is today impossible. Political capture, the need to seek profitable investments beyond those available in the local area, and simply the high returns of more risky investments, are all factors leading local banks to participate in the broader financial system. Even mutual ownership is no guarantee of financial probity, as demonstrated by the recent travails of the UK's Co-operative Bank, which almost collapsed entirely following an ill-conceived takeover of a building society in 2009.<sup>90</sup> The systemic problems of the financial system can only be properly dealt

with by taking apart financial power, whether by means of broad regulation (as was briefly achieved under postwar Keynesianism) or more revolutionary methods. Fetishising the small and the local seems to be a means of simply ignoring the more significant ways in which the system could be transformed for the better.

## **RESISTANCE IS FUTILE**

A folk-political sentiment has manifested itself in both radical horizontalist and more moderate localist movements, yet similar intuitions underpin a broad range of the contemporary left. Across these groups, a series of judgments are widely accepted: small is beautiful, the local is ethical, simpler is better, permanence is oppressive, progress is over. These kinds of ideas are favoured over any counter-hegemonic project – a politics that might contend with capitalist power at the largest scales. At its heart, much of contemporary folk politics therefore expresses a ‘deep pessimism: it assumes we can’t make large-scale, collective social change’.<sup>91</sup> This defeatist attitude runs amok on the left – and perhaps with good reason, considering the continued failures of the past thirty years.

For centre-left political parties, nostalgia for a lost past is the best that can be hoped for. The most radical content to be found here consists of dreams of social democracy and the so-called ‘golden age’ of capitalism.<sup>92</sup> Yet the very conditions which once made social democracy possible no longer exist. The capitalist ‘golden age’ was predicated on the ~~productivist~~ paradigm of the orderly factory environment, where (white, male) workers received security and a basic standard of living in return for a lifetime of stultifying boredom and social repression. Such a system depended on an international hierarchy of empires, colonies and an underdeveloped periphery; a national hierarchy of racism and sexism; and a rigid family hierarchy of female subjugation. Moreover, social democracy relied on a particular balance of forces between classes (and a willingness for compromise between them), and even this was only possible in the wake of the unprecedented destruction caused by the Great Depression and World War II, and in the face of external threats from communism and fascism. For all the nostalgia many may feel, this regime is both undesirable and impossible to recover. But the more pertinent point is that even if we could go back to social democracy, we should not. We can do

better, and the social democratic adherence to jobs and growth means it will always err on the side of capitalism and at the expense of the people. Rather than modelling our future on a nostalgic past, we should aim to create a future for ourselves. The move beyond the constraints of the present will not be achieved through a return to a more humanised capitalism reconstructed from a misty-eyed recollection of the past.

While nostalgia for a lost past is clearly not an adequate response, neither is today's widespread glorification of resistance. Resistance always means resistance against another active force. In other words, it is a defensive and reactive gesture, rather than an active movement. We do not resist a new world into being; we resist in the name of an old world. The contemporary emphasis on resistance therefore belies a defensive stance towards the encroachments of expansionary capitalism. Trade unions, for instance, position themselves as resisting neoliberalism with demands to '*save* our health system' or '*stop* austerity'; but these demands simply reveal a conservative disposition at the heart of the movement. According to these demands, the best one can hope for is small impediments in the face of a predatory capitalism. We can only struggle to keep what we already have, as limited and crisis-ridden as it may be. Even in left-leaning Latin America this trend is visible, with the most significant successes largely around efforts to impede transnational corporations, particularly in relation to mining.<sup>93</sup> In many circles resistance has come to be glorified, obscuring the conservative nature of such a stance behind a veil of radical rhetoric. Resistance is seen to be all that is possible, while constructive projects are nothing but a dream.<sup>94</sup> While it can be important in some circumstances, in the task of building a new world, resistance is futile.

Other movements argue for an approach of withdrawal, whereby individuals exit from existing social institutions. Horizontalism is closely linked to this approach, being predicated on the rejection of existing institutions and the creation of autonomous forms of community. Indeed, the recent history of activism has tended towards such approaches.<sup>95</sup> Often these approaches are explicitly opposed to complex societies, meaning that the ultimate implied destination is some form of communitarianism or anarcho-primitivism.<sup>96</sup> Others suggest making oneself invisible in order to evade detection and repression by the state.<sup>97</sup> At the extreme, some argue for what amounts to a left-wing survivalism: civilisation is in catastrophe,<sup>98</sup> and we should therefore

become invisible,<sup>99</sup> retreat to small communes,<sup>100</sup> and learn how to grow food, hunt, heal and defend ourselves.<sup>101</sup> If left at the level of survivalism, these kinds of positions, while perhaps unappealing, would at least have some consistency. They at least have the virtue of being open about their implications. However, arguments for withdrawal and exit too easily confuse the idea of a social logic *separate* from capitalism with a social logic that is *antagonistic* to capitalism – or, in an even stronger claim, that *poses a threat* to capitalist logics.<sup>102</sup> Yet capitalism has been and will continue to be compatible with a wide range of different practices and autonomous spaces. The Spanish town of Marinaleda offers a useful example of this. Over the course of three decades, this small community (pop. 2,700) has built up a ‘communist utopia’ that has expropriated land, built its own housing and co-operatives, kept living costs low, and provided work for everyone. Yet the limits of such an approach for transforming capitalism are quickly revealed: housing materials are provided by the regional government, agricultural subsidies come from the European Union, jobs are sustained by the rejection of labour-saving devices, income still comes from selling goods on wider capitalist markets, and businesses remain subjected to capitalist competition and the global financial crisis.<sup>103</sup> Marinaleda is but one example of how the project of withdrawing, escaping or exiting from capitalism is still contained within a folk-political horizon, within which defending small bunkers of autonomy against the onslaught of capitalism is the best that can be hoped for. Yet we would argue not only that more can be hoped for (and achieved), but that, in the absence of broad and systematic contention, even those small pockets of resistance are likely to be swiftly eradicated.

## ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL?

Horizontalism, localism, nostalgia, resistance and withdrawal all embody, to greater or lesser degrees, folk-political intuitions about how to do politics. And they all remain inadequate for the task of transforming capitalism. But this is not to say that they should be rejected in their entirety. As the rest of the book will make clear, there are a number of important elements to retain from these approaches. Rather than being intrinsically malign, folk politics is simply partial, temporary and insufficient. Various horizontalist approaches, for example, have raised important questions about power, domination and

hierarchy – but they have not developed adequate responses to them. Folk politics as a tendency retreats from the difficulty of these problems by attempting to dispel them from the outset. Yet, in a world where dominance, power, hierarchy and exploitation are imposed upon us, such questions must be confronted directly, rather than retreated from.<sup>104</sup> Likewise, in a banal sense, all politics is local. We act upon things in our immediate vicinity in order to change larger political structures. We cannot simply reject the local. But today's folk-political tendencies invoke a stronger sense of local politics: a retreat into the local in order to avoid the problems of a complex and abstract society; an assumption about the authenticity and naturalness of the local; and a neglect of scalable and sustainable practices that might go beyond the local. While all politics begins within the local, folk politics *remains* local.

In the end, a significant part of the problem with folk politics lies less in the particular tactics and practices it tends to adhere to than in the overarching strategic vision into which it is placed. Protests, marches, occupations, sit-ins and blockades all have their place: none of these tactics in themselves are fundamentally folk-political. But when they are marshalled by a strategic vision that sees temporary and small-scale changes as the horizon of success, or when they are extrapolated beyond the particular conditions that made them effective, they are inevitably going to be bound up within folk-political thinking. If the tactic of occupation, for example, is employed in order to create exemplars and temporary spaces of non-capitalist social relations, it will inevitably fail to achieve substantial change. If, on the other hand, it is understood as a mechanism to produce solidarity networks and mobilise them for further action, then it may still have use within broader counter-hegemonic strategies. But this sort of strategic reflection about the virtues and limits of any particular action is what is absent from too much of the left today. The numerous protests and marches and occupations typically operate without any sense of strategy, simply acting as dispersed and independent blips of resistance. There is far too little thought given to how to combine these various actions, and how they might function together to collectively build a better world. Instead we are left with actions that sometimes succeed but which rarely have an overarching eye to how this contributes to medium- and long-term goals.<sup>105</sup> In the next chapter, we look at how the right undertook such strategic reflection and orchestrated a situation in which neoliberalism became the dominant common sense of our time.



## Chapter 3

# Why Are They Winning? The Making of Neoliberal Hegemony

*We are all Keynesians now.*

Milton Friedman

If our era is dominated by one hegemonic ideology, it is that of neoliberalism. It is widely assumed that the most effective way to produce and distribute goods and services is by allowing instrumentally rational individuals to exchange via the market. State regulations and national industries are, by contrast, seen as distortions and inefficiencies holding back the productive dynamics inherent to free markets. Today, this vision of how economies should operate is what both its critics and proponents take as a baseline. Neoliberalism sets the agenda for what is realistic, necessary and possible. While the economic crisis of 2008 has upset the blind belief in neoliberalism, it nevertheless remains an entrenched part of our worldview – so much so that it is difficult even for its critics to picture coherent alternatives. Yet this ideology of neoliberalism did not emerge fully formed from the minds of Milton Friedman or Friedrich Hayek, or even the Chicago School, and its global hegemony did not arise inevitably from capitalism's logic.

In its origins, neoliberalism was a fringe theory. Its adherents found it difficult to gain employment, were often untenured, and were mocked by the Keynesian mainstream.<sup>1</sup> Neoliberalism was far from being the world-dominating ideology

it would eventually become. The question this chapter will focus on is: How did a small band of neoliberals manage to reshape the world so radically? Neoliberalism was never a given, never a necessary endpoint of capitalist accumulation. Rather, it was a political project from the beginning, and a massively successful one in the end. It succeeded by skilfully constructing an ideology and the infrastructure to support it, and by operating in a non-folk-political manner. This chapter aims to show that neoliberalism functioned as an expansive universal ideology. From humble beginnings, the universalising logic of neoliberalism made it capable of spreading across the world, infiltrating the media, the academy, the policy world, education, labour practices, and the affects, feelings and identities of everyday people. This chapter therefore focuses primarily on how neoliberal hegemony was constructed, rather than on the specific content of neoliberalism. What is of greatest interest is how it was able to transform the ideological and material fabric of global society.

What standard histories of neoliberalism often neglect is the ways in which the main components of this ideological architecture were systematically and painstakingly set in place in the decades prior to the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> It is in this prehistory of the neoliberal era that we can discern an alternative mode of political action – one that evades the limits of folk politics. This is not to say that this prehistory provides a model for any future leftist programme simply to copy; rather, it is an instructive case study in how the right was able to move beyond folk politics and create a new hegemony. The history of neoliberalism has been one of contingencies, struggle, concentrated action, patience and grand-scale strategic thinking. It has been a flexible idea actualised in various ways according to the specific circumstances it encountered: from Germany in the 1940s, Chile in the 1970s and the UK in the 1980s, to post-Hussein Iraq in the 2000s. This versatility has made neoliberalism a sometimes contradictory project, but one that succeeds precisely by transforming these contradictions into productive tensions.<sup>3</sup>

These tensions and variations have led some to believe that the term ‘neoliberalism’ is meaningless and should be relegated to polemics. But the term has some validity, even if it is often used loosely. In popular perception, neoliberalism is usually identified with a glorification of free markets – a position that also entails a commitment to free trade, private property rights and the free movement of capital. Defining neoliberalism as the veneration of free markets is problematic, however, because many ostensibly neoliberal states do

not adhere to free-market policies. Others have argued that neoliberalism is predicated upon instilling competition wherever possible.<sup>4</sup> This makes sense of the drive towards privatisation, but it fails to explain the debates within neoliberalism about whether competition is an ultimate good or not.<sup>5</sup> Some take into account these tensions within neoliberalism and recognise it as the political, rather than economic, project of a particular class.<sup>6</sup> There is certainly some truth to this claim, but, taken at face value, it cannot explain why neoliberal ideology was rejected for so long by the capitalist classes that purportedly benefit from it.

Our view is that, contrary to its popular presentation, neoliberalism differs from classical liberalism in ascribing a significant role to the state.<sup>7</sup> A major task of neoliberalism has therefore been to take control of the state and repurpose it.<sup>8</sup> Whereas classical liberalism advocated respect for a naturalised sphere supposedly beyond state control (the natural laws of man and the market), neoliberals understand that markets are not ‘natural’.<sup>9</sup> Markets do not spontaneously emerge as the state backs away, but must instead be consciously constructed, sometimes from the ground up.<sup>10</sup> For instance, there is no natural market for the commons (water, fresh air, land), or for healthcare, or for education.<sup>11</sup> These and other markets must be built through an elaborate array of material, technical and legal constructs. Carbon markets required years to be built;<sup>12</sup> volatility markets exist in large part as a function of abstract financial models;<sup>13</sup> and even the most basic markets require intricate design.<sup>14</sup> Under neoliberalism, the state therefore takes on a significant role in creating ‘natural’ markets. The state also has an important role in sustaining these markets – neoliberalism demands that the state defend property rights, enforce contracts, impose anti-trust laws, repress social dissent and maintain price stability at all costs. This latter demand, in particular, has greatly expanded in the wake of the 2008 crisis into the full-spectrum management of monetary issues through central banks. We therefore make a grave mistake if we think the neoliberal state is intended simply to step back from markets. The unprecedented interventions by central banks into financial markets are symptomatic not of the neoliberal state’s collapse, but of its central function: to create and sustain markets at all costs.<sup>15</sup> Yet it has been an arduous and winding path from neoliberalism’s origins to the present, in which its ideas hold sway over those injecting trillions of dollars into the market.

## THE NEOLIBERAL THOUGHT COLLECTIVE

The origins of neoliberalism are disparate, both geographically and intellectually. Elements of what would become the neoliberal project can be found in 1920s Vienna, 1930s Chicago and London, and 1930s and 1940s Germany. Throughout these decades, national movements worked on the margins of academia to maintain liberal ideas. It was not until 1938 that these independent movements were to gain their first transnational organisation, resulting from the Walter Lippmann Colloquium held in Paris just before the eruption of World War II. For the first time, this event brought together the classical liberal theorists, the new German ordoliberals, the British LSE liberals, and Austrian economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises. It focused on the historical ebbing of classical liberalism in the face of rising collectivism, and it was here that the first steps were made in consolidating a group of new liberal thinkers. Out of this event a new organisation – Centre International d’Études pour la Rénovation du Libéralisme – arose with the explicit aim of developing and spreading a new liberalism. The outbreak of World War II quickly put an end to the ambitious aims of this organisation, but the network of people involved would continue to work towards developing a *neoliberalism*. The seeds of the global neoliberal infrastructure had been planted.

It was an idea of Hayek’s that ultimately mobilised this infrastructure into a ‘neoliberal thought collective’ and inaugurated the slow rise of the new hegemony.<sup>16</sup> Since the Walter Lippmann Colloquium had been buried in the onslaught of World War II, the transnational infrastructure of an incipient neoliberalism had to be reconstructed. A chance meeting with a Swiss businessman in 1945 gave Hayek the financial means to put his ideas into action.<sup>17</sup> Thus was born the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS),<sup>18</sup> a closed intellectual network that provided the basic ideological infrastructure for neoliberalism to ferment.<sup>19</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that almost all of the important figures in the postwar creation of neoliberalism were in attendance at its first meeting in 1947, including the Austrian economists, the UK liberals the Chicago School, the German ordoliberals and a French contingent.<sup>20</sup>

From its beginnings, the MPS was consciously focused on changing political common sense and sought to develop a liberal utopia.<sup>20</sup> It explicitly understood that this intellectual framework would then be actively filtered

down through think tanks, universities and policy documents, in order to institutionalise and eventually monopolise the ideological terrain.<sup>21</sup> In a letter to those he had invited, Hayek wrote that the purpose of the MPS was

to enlist the support of the best minds in formulating a programme which has a chance of gaining general support. Our effort therefore differs from any political task in that it must be essentially a long-run effort, concerned not so much with what would be immediately practicable, but with the beliefs which must gain ascendancy if the dangers are to be averted which at the moment threaten individual freedom.<sup>22</sup>

The Society thus made a 'commitment to a long-run *war of position* in the "battle of ideas" . . . Privatized, strategic, elite deliberation was therefore established as the modus operandi.'<sup>23</sup> Opening the ten-day event, Hayek diagnosed the problem of the new liberals: a lack of alternatives to the existing (Keynesian) order. There was no 'consistent philosophy of the opposition groups' and no 'real programme' for change.<sup>24</sup> As a result of this diagnosis, Hayek defined the central goal of the MPS as changing elite opinion in order to establish the parameters within which public opinion could then be formed. Contrary to a common assumption, capitalists did not initially see neoliberalism as being in their interests. A major task of the MPS was therefore to educate capitalists as to why they should become neoliberals.<sup>25</sup> In order to achieve these goals, the vision of effective action was one of operating on the invisible framework of political common sense that was formed by the ideas circulating in elite networks. From its origins, the MPS eschewed folk politics by working with a global horizon, by working abstractly (outside the parameters of existing possibilities) and by formulating a clear strategic conception of the terrain to be occupied – namely, elite opinion – in order to change political common sense.

Behind this set of goals there lay a consistent but highly flexible account of what was new about neoliberalism. Divisions arose, in particular, over the role of the state in maintaining a competitive order; some argued that intervention was necessary to sustain competition, and others that intervention was the source of monopolies and centralisation.<sup>26</sup> There were less divisive arguments over other particular policy positions, indicating that this was far from a homogeneous or unified group. In many ways, the common element

was simply the social network itself, with its commitment to building a new liberalism.<sup>27</sup> Yet this inbuilt plurality allowed neoliberalism to foster and mutate as it spread around the world, giving it hegemonic strength in its adaptations to the particularity of each space.<sup>28</sup> Its flexibility as an ideology allowed it to excel in carrying out its hegemonic function of incorporating different groups into an overarching consensus.<sup>29</sup>

These debates also extended to questions of strategy. Many members and financiers of Mont Pelerin were impatient with Hayek's long-term approach and wanted to start producing books and other publications immediately, in order to influence the public.<sup>30</sup> In the midst of Keynesian dominance, stable growth and low unemployment, Hayek keenly recognised the unlikelihood of changing public opinion. The Society's strategy was self-consciously long-term, and Hayek's view eventually won out within its meetings. Outside these meetings, the networks surrounding the MPS began actively to construct an extensive transnational infrastructure of ideological diffusion. Hayek had been planning since at least the mid 1940s to establish a system of think tanks propounding neoliberal ideas, while at the same time working to place Society members in government positions (a strategy that eventually produced three heads of state and a large number of cabinet ministers).<sup>31</sup> It was the 1950s, in particular, that saw the proliferation of think tanks allied to the Society, and the subsequent diffusion of neoliberal ideas into the academic and policy worlds.

In the UK, the aims of the MPS were pursued by a network of think tanks and other organisations, such as the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Adam Smith Institute, the Centre for Policy Studies, and an array of smaller groups. Members of the MPS were to enter into US politics, first via think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute, and then through more formal positions such as Milton Friedman's role as economic advisor to Barry Goldwater in his presidential run. Yet it was in Germany that neoliberalism would first achieve both organisational and policy success.

## NOT SO TENTATIVE STEPS

In the wake of World War II, the world was primed for significant changes in economic ideas. Yet it was Germany that faced a unique set of economic difficulties – both the well-known hyperinflation problems of the Weimar

Republic and the arduous post–World War II reconstruction effort. While most of the world adopted Keynesian policies, Germany took a different pathway, guided by some of the same neoliberals who had convened at the Walter Lippmann Colloquium. Given the utter collapse of the German state, the problem facing postwar reconstruction planners was how to reconstitute the state – specifically, how to produce legitimacy without having a functional state infrastructure already in place. The answer was found in the ideas propounded by the early ordoliberalists: establish a space of economic freedom. This in turn generated a web of connections between individuals which produced the legitimacy of a nascent postwar German state. Rather than a legal legitimacy, the state was seen to derive its legitimacy from a well-functioning economy.<sup>32</sup> It was this idea that would provide the grounding for neoliberalism's first policy experiments.

Following World War II, the ordoliberalists began to move into government positions and implement their ideas, establishing the material and institutional foothold from which to shape economic ideology. The first, and perhaps most historically significant position, was the appointment of Ludwig Erhard to the directorate of economics in the postwar administrative zone of the British and US militaries. With the support of a fellow ordoliberal, Wilhelm Röpke, Erhard simultaneously eliminated all existing price and wage controls, and drastically cut income and capital taxes. This was a radical deregulatory move, and one that compelled the Soviet Union to establish a blockade on Berlin and inaugurate the Cold War.<sup>33</sup> In the decades that followed, ordoliberalists would come increasingly to populate significant positions in the German Ministry of Economics, with Erhard himself becoming Chancellor in 1963. But despite their intentions, the ordoliberalists lacked a principled distinction between legitimate and illegitimate government interventions – an ambiguity which facilitated the German economy's transformation into increasingly Keynesian forms. Interventions to maintain competition shaded into interventions to provide welfare, and by the 1970s Germany had become a standard social democratic state. The difficulties encountered in the policy world did not stop neoliberalism from innovating on other terrains, though – in particular, the space of the so-called 'second-hand dealers' in ideas.

## SECOND-HAND DEALERS

Neoliberals had long emphasised the importance of using a variety of venues to influence elites and construct a new common sense. In the postwar era, this approach spanned academia, the media and the policy world. But one of the primary innovations for neoliberal consolidation of the ideological sphere was the use of think tanks. While they had existed for over a hundred years, the extensive use made of them by the MPS was a novelty. It involved developing policy arguments, building policy solutions and homing in on economic culprits. An informal division of labour was established, with some think tanks focusing on the large philosophical ideas, targeting the very assumptions and rationale of the orthodox Keynesian position – this was the task adopted by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (MIPR) in the 1970s, for example – while others aimed to produce more immediate public policy proposals. These were explicit attempts to unhinge the dominant worldview in order to subsequently introduce specific policy solutions that were grounded upon the neoliberal view.

The figure of Antony Fisher was vital in the building of neoliberalism's ideological hegemony.<sup>34</sup> One of the founders of the UK's first neoliberal think tank – the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) – Fisher explicitly argued that the most difficult part of changing ideas lay not in their production, but in their diffusion. As a result of this belief, Fisher would be heavily involved in establishing conservative think tanks not only in the UK, but also in Canada (the Fraser Institute) and the United States (the MIPR). The IEA itself was focused on 'those whom Hayek had called the "second-hand dealers" in ideas, the journalists, academics, writers, broadcasters, and teachers who dictate the long-term intellectual thinking of the nation'.<sup>35</sup> The explicit intention was to change the ideological fabric of the British elite, infiltrating and subtly altering the terms of discourse. This also extended shrewdly to the mission of the IEA itself, which maintained a deceptive position on its own aims, presenting itself as an apolitical organisation focusing on research into markets in general.<sup>36</sup> In line with this vision of ideological takeover, the IEA produced short pamphlets intended to be as accessible as possible to a mainstream audience.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, these texts were written in a somewhat utopian fashion, without regard for whether a policy was capable of being implemented at that moment.<sup>38</sup> The goal, as always, was

the long-term redefinition of the possible. Over the course of decades, these various interventions developed a wide-ranging neoliberal worldview. More than just single-issue responses to the fashionable problems of the day, what the IEA and its associates had constructed was a systematic and coherent economic perspective.<sup>39</sup> Think tanks instilled this worldview by educating and socialising rising members of political parties. Numerous members of what would become Thatcher's administration passed through the IEA during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>40</sup> The outcome of the IEA's efforts was not only to subtly transform the economic discourse in Britain, but also to naturalise two particular policies: the necessity of attacking trade union power, and the imperative of monetary stability. The former would purportedly let markets freely adapt to changing economic circumstances, while the latter would provide the basic price stability needed for a healthy capitalist economy.

In the United States, too, think tanks and academic research groups were built to push for a broadly neoliberal agenda, the Heritage Foundation and the Hoover Institute being two of the most notable.<sup>41</sup> The MIPR aimed to redefine political common sense by writing books on neoliberal economics that were intended for a popular audience, some of which eventually sold over 500,000 copies. Other books, such as Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*, laid the foundations for the policy shift which today identifies welfare dependency rather than poverty itself as the central social problem. Numerous other widespread policy ideas, such as zero-tolerance policing and workfare, stemmed from the policy factory of the MIPR. Its books succeeded in their objective of changing the common sense of the political classes and the public. The think tank, as an organisational form, was so integral to neoliberalism's ideological success that the very process of creating think tanks was itself institutionalised. The Atlas Economic Research Foundation, founded in 1981 by Fisher, declared as its explicit aim 'to institutionalise this process of helping start up new think tanks'. Atlas today boasts of having helped create or connect over 400 neoliberal think tanks in more than eighty countries. The sheer scale of the neoliberal ideological infrastructure is made fully transparent here.

Beyond think tanks, a variety of other mechanisms were used to build up a hegemonic discourse. In working to install the Chicago brand of neoliberalism as the dominant alternative, Milton Friedman wrote extensive op-eds and newspaper columns, and made use of television interviews in a way that was

unprecedented for an academic. Businesses funded projects to turn his work into popular television shows, taking the media terrain by storm.<sup>42</sup> These technological tools were the essential means he used to diffuse his economic vision to policymakers and the public. Newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Financial Times* paralleled this effort, shaping the public's perspective by invoking neoliberal policies at every opportunity.<sup>43</sup> Business schools and management consultancies also began to adopt and spread neoliberal ideas about corporate forms, and the Chicago School became a global beacon of neoliberal thought.<sup>44</sup> Such institutions were crucial for the spread of neoliberal hegemony, since they were often the training grounds of the global elite.<sup>45</sup> Individuals would come to these neoliberal US schools and then return to their own countries with the neoliberal ideology inculcated in them. By the 1970s, therefore, a full-spectrum infrastructure had developed to promulgate neoliberal ideas. Think tanks and utopian proclamations organised long-term thinking; public-facing speeches, pamphlets and media efforts framed the general outlines of the neoliberal common sense; and politicians and policy proposals made tactical interventions into the political terrain.<sup>46</sup> Yet, despite their increasingly hegemonic potential, a mere decade prior to the arrival in office of Thatcher and Reagan, Keynesianism still reflected the most widely accepted approach to organising states and markets. The ideas of this group of neoliberal intellectuals were still often seen as senseless throwbacks to the failed policies of the pre-Great Depression era. But this would all change by the 1980s – a decade that would leave Keynesianism in disarray and enshrine neoliberalism as the preeminent model for economic modernisation.

## **GRASPING THE WHEEL**

Having made national inroads, neoliberalism first gained serious international prominence in the 1970s, as a response to the combined pressures of high unemployment and high inflation – both of which had originated in oil shocks, general commodity price rises, wage increases and the expansion of credit. The dominant Keynesian approach to the economy had argued that governments should stimulate the economy by putting money into it when unemployment was rising, but, when inflation was rising, take money out of the economy, to slow down price rises. In the 1970s, however, both problems arose simultaneously – rising inflation and rising unemployment, or

'stagflation'. The traditional Keynesian policy solutions were incapable of dealing with this conjunction, thus seemingly dictating a turn to alternative theories. It is important to be clear that, at this point, multiple interpretations of the economic problem were possible. The production of inflation through wage rigidities and trade union power was not the only possible framing of the problem, and neoliberalism was not the only possible solution. Alternative interpretations were available, alternative answers possible; in the moment, no one knew what the way out would be.<sup>47</sup> The neoliberal narrative of the crisis, for instance, plays down the role of banking deregulation by UK Chancellor Anthony Barber in the early 1970s and the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system. These deregulations sparked a surge in the monetary base and a subsequent surge in price inflation, and then wage inflation.<sup>48</sup> In other words, an alternative narrative was possible in which the problem was not strong unions, but rather deregulated finance.

That the neoliberal story won out is in no small measure because of the ideological infrastructure that adherents to its ideas had constructed over decades. The neoliberals found themselves well placed, since they had routinely argued that inflation was a necessary outcome of the welfare state's unwillingness to break wage and price rigidities. They had both a diagnosis of the problem and a solution. Government officials who were uncertain about what to do in the face of crisis found a plausible story in neoliberalism.<sup>49</sup> It was thus the long-term construction of intellectual hegemony by the neoliberal thought collective that left them well positioned to leverage their ideas into power.<sup>50</sup> As Milton Friedman famously put it, 'Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.'<sup>51</sup> This programme spells out exactly what happened in the 1970s crisis. If alternative analyses of the crisis had been accepted, it would have entailed a policy response different from that of neoliberalism. Rather than attacking the power of labour, for example, politicians could have responded by re-regulating credit creation. In other words, neoliberalism was not a necessary outcome, but a political construction.<sup>52</sup>

While Keynesian approaches were eventually able to develop an explanation of stagflation, by then it was too late, and the neoliberal approach had

taken over academic economics and the policy world. In short, neoliberalism had become hegemonic. The decade after 1979 saw Margaret Thatcher elected as the British prime minister, Paul Volcker appointed as chairman of the Federal Reserve, and Ronald Reagan elected president of the United States. The IMF and World Bank, facing identity crises after the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system, were rapidly infiltrated and converted into crucibles of the true neoliberal faith by the 1980s. France undertook a neoliberal turn during the Mitterrand administration in the early 1980s, and the major economies of Europe became bound by the neoliberal policies embodied in the constitution of the European Union. In the United States and UK, a wave of systematic attacks were launched against the power of labour. Piece by piece, trade unions were demolished, and labour regulations dismantled. Capital controls were loosened, finance was deregulated, and the welfare state began to be scavenged for profitable parts.

Outside Europe and North America, neoliberalism had already been forced on Chile and Argentina in the aftermath of military coups in the 1970s. The developing world debt crisis of the 1980s acted as a key moment to break traditional proto-socialist hegemonies and institute a turn to neoliberalism across the world.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, with the breakdown of the USSR, Eastern Europe saw a wave of neoliberalising trends that were spurred on by Western economic advisors. It is estimated that these privatising policies in former Soviet nations led to a million deaths, proving that privatisation could be just as deadly as collectivisation, and that the expansion of neoliberalism was a far from bloodless affair.<sup>54</sup> Misery, death and dictatorships lay in the wake of its advances across the globe. This was a normative regime that had forced itself into the everyday psychic and bodily reality of the world's population. By the mid 1990s, with the collapse of the USSR, neoliberalism's extension via IMF structural adjustment policies, its consolidation in the UK's New Labour and Clinton's US administration, and its ubiquity in the academic field of economics, neoliberalism had reached its hegemonic peak. The novel conjunctural moment of the 1970s was quickly forgotten by the public, and neoliberalism took on the universal and natural qualities that Thatcher's doctrine of 'there is no alternative' had espoused. Neoliberalism had become a new common sense, accepted by every party in power. It mattered little whether the left or right won; neoliberalism had stacked the deck.

## THE IMPOSSIBLE BECOMES INEVITABLE

As we have seen, neoliberalism propagated its ideology through a division of labour – academics shaping education, think tanks influencing policy, and popularisers manipulating the media. The inculcation of neoliberalism involved a full-spectrum project of constructing a hegemonic worldview. A new common sense was built that came to co-opt and eventually dominate the terminology of ‘modernity’ and ‘freedom’ – terminology that fifty years ago would have had very different connotations. Today, it is nearly impossible to speak these words without immediately invoking the precepts of neoliberal capitalism.

We all know today that ‘modernisation’ translates into job cuts, the slashing of welfare and the privatisation of government services. To modernise, today, simply means to neoliberalise. The term ‘freedom’ has suffered a similar fate, reduced to individual freedom, freedom from the state, and the freedom to choose between consumer goods. Liberal ideas of individual freedom played an important role in the ideological struggle with the USSR, priming the population of the Western world to mobilise behind any ideology that purported to value individual freedoms. With its emphasis on individual freedoms, neoliberalism was able to co-opt elements of movements organised around ‘libertarianism, identity politics, [and] multiculturalism’.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, by emphasising freedom from the state, neoliberalism was able to appeal to anarcho-capitalists and the movements of desire that exploded in May 1968.<sup>56</sup> Lastly, with the idea of freedom being limited to a freedom of the market, the ideology could co-opt consumerist desires. At the level of production, neoliberal freedom could also recruit emerging desires among workers for flexible labour – desires that were soon turned against them.<sup>57</sup> In struggling for and successfully seizing the ideological terrain of modernity and freedom, neoliberalism has managed to wind its way inexorably into our very self-conceptions. In arrogating the meaning of terms such as modernisation and freedom, neoliberalism has proved itself to be the single most successful hegemonic project of the last fifty years.

Neoliberalism has thus become ‘the *form of our existence* – the way in which we are led to conduct ourselves, to relate to others and to ourselves’.<sup>58</sup> It is, in other words, not just politicians, business leaders, the media elite and academics who have been enrolled into this vision of the world, but also

workers, students, migrants – and everyone else. In other words, neoliberalism creates subjects. Paradigmatically, we are constructed as competitive subjects – a role that encompasses and surpasses industrial capitalism's productive subject. The imperatives of neoliberalism drive these subjects to constant self-improvement in every aspect of their lives. Perpetual education the omnipresent requirement to be employable, and the constant need for self-reinvention are all of a piece with this neoliberal subjectivity.<sup>59</sup> The competitive subject, moreover, straddles the divide between the public and the private. One's personal life is as bound to competition as one's work life. Under these conditions, it is no surprise that anxiety proliferates in contemporary societies. Indeed, an entire battery of psychopathologies has been exacerbated under neoliberalism: stress, anxiety, depression and attention deficit disorders are increasingly common psychological responses to the world around us.<sup>60</sup> Crucially, the construction of everyday neoliberalism has also been a primary source of political passivity. Even if you do not buy into the ideology, its effects nevertheless force you into increasingly precarious situations and increasingly entrepreneurial inclinations. We need money to survive, so we market ourselves, do multiple jobs, stress and worry about how to pay rent, pinch pennies at the grocery store, and turn socialising into networking. Given these effects, political mobilisation becomes a dream that is perpetually postponed, driven away by the anxieties and pressures of everyday life.

At the same time, we should recognise that this production of subjectivity was not simply an external imposition. Hegemony, in all its forms, operates not as an illusion, but as something that builds on the very real desires of the population. Neoliberal hegemony has played upon ideas, yearnings and drives already existing within society, mobilising and promising to fulfil those that could be aligned with its basic agenda. The worship of individual freedom, the value ascribed to hard work, freedom from the rigid work week, individual expression through work, the belief in meritocracy, the bitterness felt at corrupt politicians, unions and bureaucracies – these beliefs and desires pre-exist neoliberalism and find expression in it.<sup>61</sup> Bridging the left-right divide, many people today are simply angry at what they see as others taking advantage of the system. Hatred for the rich tax evader combines easily with disgust for the poor welfare cheat; anger at the oppressive employer becomes indistinguishable from anger at all politicians. This is linked with the spread

of middle-class identities and aspirations – desires for home ownership, self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit were fostered and extended into formerly working-class social spaces.<sup>62</sup> Neoliberal ideology has a grounding in lived experience and does not exist simply as an academic puzzle.<sup>63</sup> Neoliberalism has become parasitical on everyday experience, and any critical analysis that misses this is bound to misrecognise the deep roots of neoliberalism in today's society. Over the course of decades, neoliberalism has therefore come to shape not only elite opinions and beliefs, but also the normative fabric of everyday life itself. The particular interests of neoliberals have become universalised, which is to say, hegemonic.<sup>64</sup> Neoliberalism constitutes our collective common sense, making us its subjects whether we believe in it or not.<sup>65</sup>

### A MONT PELERIN OF THE LEFT?

It has often been argued that neoliberalism succeeded (and continues to succeed in spite of its failures) because it is supported by a series of overlapping and powerful interests – the transnational elite, the financiers, the major stockholders of the largest corporations. While these interests have certainly assisted the potency of the neoliberal ideology, such an explanation nevertheless leaves certain questions unanswered. If elite support was sufficient for ideological success, and if neoliberalism was clearly beneficial to elites, there would not have been a forty-year delay between the initial formulation of the ideas and their implementation. Instead, the embedded liberalism of Keynesianism remained ideologically dominant even as it constrained powerful interests. In particular, financial interests were sidelined for a long period after the 1929 crash and ensuing Great Depression. The power dynamics maintaining the Keynesian consensus needed to be taken apart piecemeal. Equally, an explanation of neoliberalism's success that relies solely on its compatibility with particular elite interests also leaves unexplained why other possible responses to the problems of the 1970s were never implemented. An important element of neoliberalism's eventual ideological success is that there was both a crisis and a readily available solution. The crisis (stagflation) was one that no government knew how to deal with at the time, while the solution was the preconceived neoliberal ideas that had been fermenting for decades in its ideological ecology. It was not that neoliberals presented a

better argument for their position (the myth of rational political discourse); rather, an institutional infrastructure was constructed to project their ideas and establish them as the new common sense of the political elite.

In all of this there are important lessons to be learned, which have led some to call for a Mont Pelerin of the left.<sup>66</sup> On the broadest level, this history of neoliberalism serves to demonstrate that the greatest recent success of the right – installing a neoliberal hegemony on a global scale – was accomplished through non-folk-political means. This means, in the first place, that the neoliberals thought in long-term visions. This was a different temporality from both election cycles and the boom-and-bust of individual protests. Instead, what the left can learn from is how the MPS patiently set out explicit objectives and analysed the terrain of their historical conjunction, all in order to propose specific and effective means to alter that terrain. It set its sights on long-term change, waiting forty years for the crisis of Keynesianism and the emergence of Reagan and Thatcher. In taking this approach, the intellectuals of neoliberalism thought abstractly in terms of possibilities: what was impossible during their own time became possible later, partly through their actions and preparations. Secondly, they sought to build a counter-hegemonic project that would overturn the consensus around social democracy and Keynesian policies. They took a full-spectrum approach to changing hegemonic conditions and built up an entire ideological infrastructure that was capable of insinuating itself into every political issue and every fibre of political common sense. It overthrew the hegemonic ideas of its time. As Philip Mirowski writes, their strategic genius was

to appreciate that it is not enough to dangle a utopian vision just beyond reach as eventual motivation for political action; the cadre that triumphs is the side that can simultaneously mount a full-set of seemingly unrelated political proposals that deal with the short-, medium-, and long-term horizons of action, combining regimes of knowledge and interim outcomes, so that the end result is the inexorable movement of the polis ever closer to the eventual goal. The shrewd strategy of simultaneously conducting both a short game and a long game, superficially appearing to the unformed to be in mutual conflict but united behind the scenes by overarching theoretical aims, is probably the single most significant explanation of the triumph of neoliberal policies during a conjuncture where their opponents had come to expect utter refutation.<sup>67</sup>

## WHY ARE THEY WINNING? 67

The third major lesson for the left to learn is that the loose collective of MPS also thought expansively in spatial terms – aiming to spread the network globally, through key nodes. In the think tank, they found an organisational form adapted to the task of global intellectual hegemony. They established networks between think tanks, politicians, journalists, the media and teachers – building a consistency between these disparate groups that did not require a unity of purpose or organisational form. This entailed an admirable flexibility in their project. While neoliberalism is often denounced as being too empirically disparate to make sense as a coherent project, it is in fact the willingness to modify its ideas in light of conditions on the ground that has made it particularly powerful as an ideology.

The call for a Mont Pelerin of the left should therefore not be taken as an argument to simply copy its mode of operation. The argument is rather that the left can learn from the long-term vision, the methods of global expansion, the pragmatic flexibility and the counter-hegemonic strategy that united an ecology of organisations with a diversity of interests. The demand for a Mont Pelerin of the left is ultimately a call to build anew the hegemony of the left.



## **Chapter.4**

### **Left Modernity**

*In the present climate, around the world, almost everything that can be proposed as an alternative will appear to be either utopian or trivial. Thus our programmatic thinking is paralysed.*

Roberto Mangabeira Unger

This chapter marks a turning point. From the negative task of diagnosing the strategic limitations of the contemporary left, this chapter begins the positive project of elaborating an escape route from our current condition. In the following chapters, we argue that the contemporary left should reclaim modernity, build a populist and hegemonic force, and mobilise towards a post-work future. Folk-political attempts at prefiguration, direct action and relentless horizontalism are unlikely to achieve this, partly because they misrecognise the nature of their opponent. Capitalism is an aggressively expansive universal, from which efforts to segregate a space of autonomy are bound to fail.<sup>1</sup> Withdrawal, resistance, localism and autonomous spaces represent a defensive game against an uncompromising and incessantly encroaching capitalism. Moreover, particularisms can easily coexist with capitalist universalism. The innumerable cultural and political variants of capitalism do little to stifle the expansion of commodification, the creation of proletariats, and the imperative of accumulation. The much-lamented capacity of capitalism to incorporate resistance more often than not simply reveals

that particularisms are, in themselves, incapable of competing against a universalism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, given neoliberalism's inherently expansionary nature, only an alternative expansionary and inclusive universal of some kind will be able to combat and supersede capitalism on a global scale.<sup>3</sup> With the dynamics of accumulation at the heart of capital, a non-expansionary capitalism is an oxymoron. An ambitious leftist politics therefore cannot be satisfied with measures to defend localities. It must seek instead to construct a new future-oriented politics capable of challenging capitalism at the largest scales. It must unmask the pseudo-universality of capitalist social relations and recapture the meaning of the future.

This chapter takes a step back from the empirical and historical focus of the earlier chapters, and seeks to elaborate a philosophical ground for the chapters that follow. We argue that a key element of any future-oriented left must be to contest the idea of 'modernity'. Whereas folk-political approaches lack an enticing vision of the future, struggles over modernity have always been struggles over what the future should look like: from the communist modernism of the early Soviet Union to the scientific socialism of postwar social democracy, and on to the sleek neoliberal efficiency of Thatcher and Reagan.<sup>4</sup> What it means to be modern is not pre-established, but is instead a highly 'contested field'.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in the face of capitalism's success at universalising itself, this term has been almost fully ceded to the right. 'Modernisation' has come to signify simply some dread combination of privatisation, heightened exploitation, rising inequality and inept managerialism.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, notions of the future tend to revolve around ideas of ecological apocalypse, the dismantling of the welfare state, or corporate-led dystopia, rather than anything bearing the mark of utopia or universal emancipation. For many, therefore, modernity is simply a cultural expression of capitalism.<sup>7</sup> From this accepted wisdom, the necessary conclusion follows: only the cancellation of modernity can bring about the end of capitalism. The result has been an anti-modern tendency within numerous social movements from the 1970s onward. Yet this mistaken conflation of modernity with the institutions of capitalism overlooks the alternative forms it can take, and the ways in which many anti-capitalist struggles rely upon its ideals.<sup>8</sup> Modernity presents both a narrative for popular mobilisation and a philosophical framework for understanding the arc of history. As the term that indexes the direction of society, it must be a key discursive battleground for any leftist politics invested in

creating a better world.<sup>9</sup> This chapter sets out the broad philosophical stakes of such a project by examining three factors that would help to elaborate a left modernity: an image of historical progress, a universalist horizon and a commitment to emancipation.

In discussing ‘modernity’, we face the immediate problem of clarifying what it means. It can refer to a chronological period, typically filtered through European history with a variety of events having been posited as its origin: the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution.<sup>10</sup> For others, modernity is defined by a distinct set of practices and institutions: widespread bureaucratisation, a basic framework of liberal democracy, the differentiation of social functions, the colonisation of the non-European world, and the expansion of capitalist social relations. Yet modernity also refers to a repertoire of conceptual innovations revolving around universal ideals of progress, reason, freedom and democracy. This chapter emphasises these latter aspects: modernity names a set of concepts that have been independently developed in numerous cultures across the world, but which took on a particular resonance in Europe. These are the elements of modernity that cannot be renounced, and that form the well-spring from which more popular discourses around modernisation are generated. The conceptual ideals – such as freedom, democracy and secularism – are the source of both capitalist modernity and the struggles against it. Ideas associated with modernity animated the work of abolitionists, formed the basis of numerous African trade union struggles,<sup>11</sup> and continue today in ‘those thousands of campaigns for wages, land rights, basic health, and security, dignity, self-determination, autonomy, and so forth’.<sup>12</sup> In broad terms, then, whether it is explicitly recognised or not, the political struggles of today are struggles *within* the space of modernity and its ideals. Modernity must be contested, not rejected.<sup>13</sup>

## HYPERTHISTORICAL PROGRESS

To invoke modernity is ultimately to raise the question of the future. What should the future look like? What courses should we set? What does it mean to be contemporary? And whose future is it? Since the emergence of the term, modernity has been concerned with unravelling a circular or retrospective notion of time and introducing a rupture between the present

and the past. With this break, the future is projected as being potentially *different from* and *better than* the past.<sup>14</sup> Modernity is tantamount to ‘the discovery of the future’ and has therefore found itself intimately linked with notions such as ‘progress, advance, development, emancipation, liberation, growth, accumulation, Enlightenment, embetterment, [and the] avant-garde’.<sup>15</sup> Suggesting that history can progress through deliberate human action, it is the nature of this progress that competing definitions of modernity have struggled over.<sup>16</sup> Historically, the left has found its natural home in being oriented towards the future. From early communist visions of technological progress, to Soviet space utopias, to the social democratic rhetoric of the ‘white heat of technology’, what set the left apart from the right was its unambiguous embrace of the future. The future was to be an improvement over the present in material, social and political terms. By contrast, the forces of the political right were, with a few notable exceptions, defined by their defence of tradition and their essentially reactionary nature.<sup>17</sup>

This situation was reversed during the rise of neoliberalism, with politicians like Thatcher commanding the rhetoric of modernisation and the future to great effect. Co-opting these terms and mobilising them into a new hegemonic common sense, neoliberalism’s vision of modernity has held sway ever since. Consequently, discussions of the left in terms of the future now seem aberrant, even absurd. With the postmodern moment, the seemingly intrinsic links between the future, modernity and emancipation were prized apart. Philosophers like Simon Critchley can now confidently assert that ‘we have to resist the idea and ideology of the future, which is always the ultimate trump card of capitalist ideas of progress’.<sup>18</sup> Such folk-political sentiments blindly accept the neoliberal common sense, preferring to shy away from grand visions and replace them with a posturing resistance. From the radical left’s discomfort with technological modernity to the social democratic left’s inability to envision an alternative world, everywhere today the future has largely been ceded to the right. A skill that the left once excelled at – building enticing visions for a better world – has deteriorated after years of neglect.

If the left is to recover a sense of progress, however, it cannot simply adopt the classic images of history headed towards a singular destination. Progress, for these approaches, was not only possible, but in fact woven as a necessity into the very fabric of history. Human societies were thought to travel along a pre-defined pathway towards a single outcome modelled after Europe. The

nations of Europe were deemed to have developed capitalist modernity independently, and their historical experiences of development were considered to be both necessary and superior to those of other cultures.<sup>19</sup> Such ideas dominated traditional European philosophy and continued on in the influential modernisation literature of the 1950s and 1960s, with their attempts to naturalise capitalism against a Soviet opponent.<sup>20</sup> Partly endorsed by both early Marxism and later Keynesian and neoliberal capitalisms, a one-size-fits-all model of historical progress positioned non-Western societies as lacking and in need of development – a position that served to justify colonial and imperial practices.<sup>21</sup>

From the standpoint of their philosophical critics, these notions of progress were disparaged precisely for their belief in preconceived destinations – whether in the liberal progression towards capitalist democracy or in the Marxist progression towards communism. The complex and often disastrous record of the twentieth century demonstrated conclusively that history could not be relied upon to follow any predetermined course.<sup>22</sup> Regression was as likely as progress, genocide as possible as democratisation.<sup>23</sup> In other words, there was nothing inherent in the nature of history, the development of economic systems, or sequences of political struggle that could guarantee any particular outcome. From a broadly left perspective, for example, even those limited but not insignificant political gains that have been achieved – such as welfare provision, women's rights and worker protections – can be rolled back. Moreover, even in states where nominally communist governments took power, it proved far more difficult than expected to transition from a capitalist system of production to a fully communist one.<sup>24</sup> This series of historical experiences fuelled an internal critique of European modernity by way of psychoanalysis, critical theory and poststructuralism. For the thinkers of postmodernism, modernity came to be associated with a credulous naivety.<sup>25</sup> In Jean-François Lyotard's epochal definition, postmodernity was identified as the era that has grown to be suspicious of the grand metanarrative.<sup>26</sup> On this account, postmodernity is a cultural condition of disillusionment with the kinds of grandiose narratives represented by capitalist, liberal and communist accounts of progress.

To be sure, these critiques capture something important about the chronological texture of our time. And yet, the announcement of the end of grand narratives has often been viewed by those outside Europe as being absolutely

of a piece with modernity.<sup>27</sup> Further, with the benefit of thirty years' hindsight, the broader impact of the cultural condition diagnosed by Lyotard has not been the decline of belief in metaharratives per se, but rather a broad disenchantment with those offered by the left. The association between capitalism and modernisation remains, while properly progressive notions of the future have wilted under postmodern critique and been quashed beneath the social wreckage of neoliberalism. Most significantly, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of globalisation, history does *appear* to have a grand narrative.<sup>28</sup> Throughout the world, markets, wage labour, commodities and productivity-enhancing technologies have all expanded under the systemic imperative to accumulate. Capitalism has become the destiny of contemporary societies, happily coexisting with national differences and paying little heed to clashes between civilisations. But we can draw a distinction here between the endpoint (capitalism) and the pathway towards it. Indeed, the mutual entanglement of countries means that the European pathway (heavily reliant on exploiting colonies and slavery) is barred for many of the newly developing countries. While there are broad paradigms of development, each country has had to find its own unique way to respond to the imperatives of global capitalism. The path of capitalist modernisation is therefore instantiated in different cultures, following different trajectories and with different rhythms of development.<sup>29</sup> Uneven and combined development is the order of the day.<sup>30</sup> Progress is therefore not bound to a single European path, but is instead filtered through a variety of political and cultural constellations, all directed towards instantiating capitalist relations. Today, modernisers simply fight over which variant of capitalism to install.

Recuperating the idea of progress under such circumstances means, first and foremost, contesting the dogma of this inevitable endpoint. Capitalist modernity was never a necessary outcome, but instead a successful project driven by various classes and a systemic imperative towards accumulation and expansion. Various modernities are possible, and new visions of the future are essential for the left. Such images are a necessary supplement to any transformative political project. They give a direction to political struggles and generate a set of criteria to adjudicate which struggles to support, which movements to resist, what to invent, and so on. In the absence of images of progress, there can only be reactivity, defensive battles, local resistance and a bunker mentality – what we have characterised as folk politics. Visions of the

future are therefore indispensable for elaborating a movement against capitalism. Contra the earlier thinkers of modernity, there is no necessity to progress, nor a singular pathway from which to adjudicate the extent of development. Instead, progress must be understood as *hyperstitional*: as a kind of fiction, but one that aims to transform itself into a truth. Hyperstitions operate by catalysing dispersed sentiment into a historical force that brings the future into existence. They have the temporal form of 'will have been'. Such hyperstitions of progress form orienting narratives with which to navigate forward, rather than being an established or necessary property of the world. Progress is a matter of political struggle, following no pre-plotted trajectory or natural tendency, and with no guarantee of success. If the supplanting of capitalism is impossible from the standpoint of one or even many defensive stances, it is because any form of prospective politics must set out to construct *the new*. Pathways of progress must be cut and paved, not merely travelled along in some pre-ordained fashion; they are a matter of political achievement rather than divine or earthly providence.

## **SUBVERSIVE UNIVERSALS**

Any elaboration of an alternative image of progress must inevitably face up to the problem of universalism – the idea that certain values, ideas and goals may hold across all cultures.<sup>31</sup> Capitalism, as we have argued, is an expansionary universal that weaves itself through multiple cultural fabrics, reworking them as it goes along. Anything less than a competing universal will end up being smothered by an all-embracing series of capitalist relations.<sup>32</sup> Various particularisms – localised, specific forms of politics and culture – cohabituate with ease in the world of capitalism. The list of possibilities continues to grow as capitalism differentiates into Chinese capitalism, American capitalism, Brazilian capitalism, Indian capitalism, Nigerian capitalism, and so on. If defending a particularism is insufficient, it is because history shows us that the global space of universalism is a space of conflict, with each contender requiring the relative provincialisation of its competitors.<sup>33</sup> If the left is to compete with global capitalism, it needs to rethink the project of universalism.

But to invoke such an idea is to call forth a number of fundamental critiques directed against universalism in recent decades. While a universal

politics must move beyond any local struggles, generalising itself at the global scale and across cultural variations, it is for these very reasons that it has been criticised.<sup>34</sup> As a matter of historical record, European modernity was inseparable from its ‘dark side’ – a vast network of exploited colonial dominions, the genocide of indigenous peoples, the slave trade, and the plundering of colonised nations’ resources.<sup>35</sup> In this conquest, Europe presented itself as embodying the universal way of life. All other peoples were simply residual particulars that would inevitably come to be subsumed under the European way – even if this required ruthless physical violence and cognitive assault to guarantee the outcome. Linked to this was a belief that the universal was equivalent to the homogeneous. Differences between cultures would therefore be erased in the process of particulars being subsumed under the universal, creating a culture modelled in the image of European civilisation. This was a universalism indistinguishable from pure chauvinism. Throughout this process, Europe dissimulated its own parochial position by deploying a series of mechanisms to efface the subjects who made these claims – white, heterosexual, property-owning males. Europe and its intellectuals abstracted away from their location and identity, presenting their claims as grounded in a ‘view from nowhere’.<sup>36</sup> This perspective was taken to be untarnished by racial, sexual, national or any other particularities, providing the basis for both the alleged universality of Europe’s claims and the illegitimacy of other perspectives. While Europeans could speak and embody the universal, other cultures could only be represented as particular and parochial. Universalism has therefore been central to the worst aspects of modernity’s history.

Given this heritage, it might seem that the simplest response would be to rescind the universal from our conceptual arsenal. But, for all the difficulties with the idea, it nevertheless remains necessary. The problem is partly that one cannot simply reject the concept of the universal without generating other significant problems. Most notably, giving up on the category leaves us with nothing but a series of diverse particulars. There appears no way to build meaningful solidarity in the absence of some common factor. The universal also operates as a transcendent ideal – never satisfied with any particular embodiment, and always open to striving for better.<sup>37</sup> It contains the conceptual impulse to undo its own limits. Rejecting this category also risks Orientalising other cultures; transforming them into an exotic Other. If there

are only particularisms, and provincial Europe is associated with reason, science, progress and freedom, then the unpleasant implication is that non-Western cultures must be devoid of these. The old Orientalist divides are inadvertently sustained in the name of a misguided anti-universalism. On the other hand, one risks licensing all sorts of oppressions as simply the inevitable consequence of plural cultural forms. All the problems of cultural relativism reappear if there are no criteria to discern *which* global knowledges, politics and practices support a politics of emancipation. Given all of this, it is unsurprising to see aspects of universalism pop up throughout history and across cultures,<sup>38</sup> to see even its critics begrudgingly accept its necessity,<sup>39</sup> and to see a variety of attempts to revise the category.<sup>40</sup>

To maintain this necessary conceptual tool, the universal must be identified not with an established set of principles and values, but rather with an empty placeholder that is impossible to fill definitively. Universals emerge when a particular comes to occupy this position through hegemonic struggle:<sup>41</sup> the particular ('Europe') comes to represent itself as the universal ('global'). It is not simply a false universal, though, as there is a mutual contamination: the universal becomes embodied in the particular, while the particular loses some of its specificities in functioning as the universal. Yet there can never be a fully achieved universalism, and universals are therefore always open to contestation from other universals. This is what we will later outline in politico-strategic terms as counter-hegemony – a project aimed at subverting an existing universalism in favour of a new order. This leads us to our second point – as counter-hegemonic, universals can have a subversive and liberating strategic function. On the one hand, a universal makes an unconditional demand – everything must be placed under its rule.<sup>42</sup> Yet, on the other hand, universalism is never an achieved project (even capitalism remains incomplete). This tension renders any established hegemonic structure open to contestation and enables universals to function as insurrectionary vectors against exclusions. For example, the concept of universal human rights, problematic as it may be, has been put to use by numerous movements, ranging from local housing struggles to international justice for war crimes. Its universal and unconditional demand has been mobilised in order to highlight those who are left out of its protections and rights. Similarly, feminists have criticised certain concepts as exclusionary of women and mobilised universal claims against their constraints, as in the use

of the universal idea that ‘all humans are equal’. In such cases, the particular ('woman') becomes a way to prosecute a critique against an existing universal ('humanity'). Meanwhile, the previously established universal ('humanity') becomes revealed as a particular ('man').<sup>43</sup> These examples show that universals can be revitalised by the struggles that both challenge and elucidate them. In this regard, ‘to appeal to universalism as a way of asserting the superiority of Western culture’ is to betray universality, but to appeal to universalism as a way of dismantling the superiority of the West is to realize it.<sup>44</sup> Universalism, on this account, is the product of politics, not a transcendent judge standing above the fray.

We can turn now to one final aspect of universalism, which is its heterogeneous nature.<sup>45</sup> As capitalism makes clear, universalism does not entail homogeneity – it does not necessarily involve converting diverse things into the same kind of thing. In fact, the power of capitalism is precisely its versatility in the face of changing conditions on the ground and its capacity to accommodate difference. A similar prospect must also hold for any leftist universal – it must be one that integrates difference rather than erasing it. What then does all of this mean for the project of modernity? It means that any particular image of modernity must be open to co-creation, and further transformation and alteration. And in a globalised world where different peoples necessarily co-exist, it means building systems to live in common despite the plurality of ways of life. Contrary to Eurocentric accounts and classic images of universalism, it must recognise the agency of those outside Europe, and the necessity of their voices in building truly planetary and universal futures. The universal, then, is an empty placeholder that hegemonic particulars (specific demands, ideals and collectives) come to occupy. It can operate as a subversive and emancipatory vector of change with respect to established universalisms, and it is heterogeneous and includes differences, rather than eliminating them.

## **SYNTHETIC FREEDOM**

While the left has traditionally been associated with ideals of equality (manifested today in the focus on income and wealth inequalities), we believe that freedom is an equally essential principle of left modernity. This concept has been central to the political battles fought throughout the twentieth century,

with the United States routinely posing as ‘the free world’ against a totalitarian enemy (in the figure of the USSR, and then the increasingly incoherent images of ‘Islamofascism’). In these hegemonic battles, capitalism has repeatedly asserted its superiority by upholding an idea of *negative freedom*.<sup>46</sup> This is the freedom of individuals from arbitrary interference by other individuals, collectives and institutions (paradigmatically, the state). Negative freedom’s insistence on the absence of interference has made it an ideal tool to wield against purportedly totalitarian opponents, yet it is a woefully emaciated concept of freedom. In practice, it translates into a modicum of political freedom from the state (ever less so in an age of digital spying and the war on terror) and the economic freedoms to sell our labour power and to choose between shiny new consumer goods.<sup>47</sup> Under negative freedom, the rich and the poor are considered equally free, despite the obvious differences in their capacities to act.<sup>48</sup> Negative freedom is entirely compatible with mass poverty, starvation, homelessness, unemployment and inequality. It is also entirely compatible with our desires being manufactured and designed by pervasive advertising. Against this limited concept of freedom, we argue for a much more substantial version.

Whereas negative freedom is concerned with assuring the formal right to avoid interference, ‘synthetic freedom’ recognises that a formal right without a material capacity is worthless.<sup>49</sup> Under a democracy, for example, we are all formally free to run for political leadership. But without the financial and social resources to run a campaign, this is a meaningless freedom. Equally, we are all formally free to not take a job, but most of us are nevertheless practically forced into accepting whatever is on offer.<sup>50</sup> In either case, various options may be theoretically available, but for all practical purposes are off the table. This reveals the significance of having the means to realise a formal right, and it is this emphasis on the means and capacities to act that is crucial for a leftist approach to freedom. As Marx and Engels wrote, ‘it is possible to achieve real liberation only in the real world and by real means’.<sup>51</sup> Understood in this way, freedom and power become intertwined. If power is the basic capacity to produce intended effects in someone or something else,<sup>52</sup> then an increase in our ability to carry out our desires is simultaneously an increase in our freedom. The more capacity we have to act, the freer we are. One of the biggest indictments of capitalism is that it enables the freedom to act for only a vanishingly small few. A primary aim of a postcapitalist world would

therefore be to maximise synthetic freedom, or in other words, to enable the flourishing of all of humanity and the expansion of our collective horizons.<sup>53</sup> Achieving this involves at least three different elements: the provision of the basic necessities of life, the expansion of social resources, and the development of technological capacities.<sup>54</sup> Taken together, these form a synthetic freedom that is constructed rather than natural, a collective historical achievement rather than the result of simply leaving people be. Emancipation is thus not about detaching from the world and liberating a free soul, but instead a matter of constructing and cultivating the right attachments.

In the first place, synthetic freedom entails the maximal provision of the basic resources needed for a meaningful life: things like income, time, health and education. Without these resources, most people are left *formally* but not *really* free. Understood in this way, rising global inequality is revealed as an equally massive disparity in freedom. One initial step in resolving this is the classic social democratic goal of providing the common goods of society, such as healthcare, housing, childcare, education, transport and internet access.<sup>55</sup> The liberal idea in which these basic necessities of life are supposedly enhanced by freedom of choice in the market ignores the actual (financial and cognitive) burdens involved in making such choices.<sup>56</sup> In a world of synthetic freedom, high-quality public goods would be provided for us, leaving us to get on with our lives rather than worrying about which healthcare provider to go with. Beyond the social democratic imagination, however, lie two further essentials of existence: time and money. Free time is the basic condition for self-determination and the development of our capacities.<sup>57</sup> Equally, synthetic freedom demands the provision of a basic income to all in order for them to be fully free.<sup>58</sup> Such a policy not only provides the monetary resources for living under capitalism, but also makes possible an increase in free time. It provides us with the capacity to choose our lives: we can experiment and build unconventional lives, choosing to foster our cultural, intellectual and physical sensibilities instead of blindly working to survive.<sup>59</sup> Time and money therefore represent key components of freedom in any substantive sense.

A full image of synthetic freedom must also seek to expand our capacities beyond what is currently possible. If it is to avoid the problem of manipulating people into contentment with the status quo, synthetic freedom must be open to whatever people might desire.<sup>60</sup> That is to say, freedom cannot simply

be equated with making existing options viable, but instead must be open to the largest possible set of options. In this, collective resources are essential.<sup>61</sup> Processes of social reasoning, for instance, can enable common understandings of the world, creating a ‘we’ in the process that has much greater powers to act than individuals alone.<sup>62</sup> Equally, language is effectively cognitive scaffolding that enables us to leverage symbolic thought to expand our horizons.<sup>63</sup> The development, deepening and expansion of knowledge enable us to imagine and achieve capacities that are otherwise unattainable. As we acquire technical knowledge of our built environment and scientific knowledge of the natural world, and come to understand the fluid tendencies of the social world, we gain greater powers to act. As Louis Althusser put it,

Just as knowledge of the laws of light has never prevented men from seeing . . . so knowledge of the laws that govern the development of societies does not prevent men from living, or take the place of labour, love and struggle. On the contrary: knowledge of the laws of light has produced the glasses which have transformed men’s sight, just as knowledge of the laws of social development has given rise to endeavours which have transformed and enlarged the horizon of human existence.<sup>64</sup>

The anti-intellectualism that permeates the political right, and increasingly infects the critical left, is therefore a retrogression of the worst kind. Healthy scepticism is transformed into an abdication of our commitments to expand freedom. This retrogression in relation to knowledge also occurs in the fantasies of immediate and unbound freedoms in practice. The voluntaristic image that sees mediations, institutions and abstractions as opposed to freedom simply confuses the absence of artifice with the full expression of freedom. Needless to say, this is misguided. Collective action, with its expansion of synthetic freedom, is more often than not carried out through complex divisions of labour, mediated chains of engagement and abstract institutional structures. The social aspect of synthetic freedom is therefore not a return to some human desire for face-to-face sociality and simple cooperation, but instead a call for collective, complex and mediated self-determination.

Finally, if we are to expand our capacities to act, the development of technology must play a central role. As has always been the case, ‘technology is the source of our options [and] options are the basis of a future that keeps us

above the level of pawn'.<sup>65</sup> Our level of freedom is highly dependent upon the historical conditions of scientific and technological development.<sup>66</sup> The artifices that emerge from these fields both expand existing capacities for action and create entirely new ones in the process. The full development of synthetic freedom therefore requires a reconfiguration of the material world in accordance with the drive to expand our capacities for action. It demands experimentation with collective and technological augmentation, and a spirit that refuses to accept any barrier as natural and inevitable.<sup>67</sup> Cyborg augmentations, artificial life, synthetic biology and technologically mediated reproduction are all examples of this elaboration.<sup>68</sup> The overall aim must therefore be picked out as an unrelenting project to unbind the necessities of this world and transform them into materials for the further construction of freedom.<sup>69</sup> Such an image of emancipation can never be satisfied with or condensed into a static society, but will instead continually strain beyond any limitations. Freedom is a synthetic enterprise, not a natural gift.

Underlying this idea of emancipation is a vision of humanity as a transformative and constructible hypothesis: one that is built through theoretical and practical experimentation and elaboration.<sup>70</sup> There is no authentic human essence to be realised, no harmonious unity to be returned to, no unalienated humanity obscured by false mediations, no organic wholeness to be achieved. Alienation is a mode of enablement, and humanity is an incomplete vector of transformation. What we are and what we can become are open-ended projects to be constructed in the course of time. As Sadie Plant puts it,

It's always been problematic to talk about the liberation of women because that presupposes that we know what women are. If both women and men have been organised into the forms we currently take, then we don't want to liberate what we are now, if you see what I mean . . . It's not a question of liberation so much as a question of evolution – or engineering. There's a gradual re-engineering of what it can be to be a woman and we don't yet know what it is. We have to find out.<sup>71</sup>

What must therefore be articulated is a humanism that is not defined in advance. This is a project of self-realisation, but one without a pre-established endpoint.<sup>72</sup> It is only through undergoing the process of revision and

construction that humanity can come to know itself. This means revising the human both theoretically and practically, engaging in new modes of being and new forms of sociality as practical ramifications of making ‘the human’ explicit.<sup>73</sup> It is to undertake an interventionist approach to the human that is opposed to those humanisms that protect a parochial image of the human at all costs.<sup>74</sup> These interventions range from individual bodily experimentation to collective political mobilisations against restricted images of the human, and everything in between.<sup>75</sup> It means liberating ourselves from the decrepit economic image of humanity that capitalist modernity has installed, and inventing a new humanity. Emancipation, under this vision, would therefore mean increasing the capacity of humanity to act according to whatever its desires might become. And universal emancipation would be the insistent and maximal extension of this goal to the entirety of our species. It is in this sense that universal emancipation lies at the heart of a modern left.<sup>76</sup>

We have seen that, without a conception of the future, the left becomes bound to a defence of tradition, and to protecting bunkers of resistance. What, then, would a left modernity look like? It would be one that offered enticing and expansive visions of a better future. It would operate with a universal horizon, mobilise a substantial concept of freedom, and make use of the most advanced technologies in order to achieve its emancipatory goals. Rather than a Eurocentric view of the future, it would rely upon a global set of voices articulating and negotiating in practice what a common and plural future might be. Whether operating through slave revolts, workers’ struggles, anti-colonial uprisings or women’s movements, the critics of sedimented universalisms have always been essential agents in modernity’s construction of the future; they are the ones who have continually revised, revolted and created a ‘universalism from below’.<sup>77</sup> Yet to truly enable the liberation of futures in the plural, the current global order premised on waged labour and capitalist accumulation will need to be transcended first. A left modernity will, in other words, require building a postcapitalist and post-work platform upon which multiple ways of living could emerge and flourish. The next two chapters will set out both the necessity and desirability of this particular vision of the future.



## **Chapter 7**

### **A New Common Sense**

*The key is to succeed in making ‘common sense’ go in a direction of change.*

Pablo Iglesias

A post-work society holds a potentially broad appeal and would materially improve the lives of most – but this is no guarantee of it coming about. Media discussions of basic income and automation today often seem to assume the benevolence of elites, the political neutrality of technology and the inevitability of a post-work society. Yet an array of powerful forces is invested in the continuation of the status quo, and the left has been devastated over the past few decades. Misery remains more likely than luxury. Under current conditions, automation is likely to cause more unemployment, with the benefits of new technologies going to their wealthy owners. Any free time we get will be eliminated with the production of dreary new jobs or the extension of precarious existence. And if a basic income were achieved tomorrow, it would almost certainly be set below poverty levels and simply act as a handout to companies. To achieve a meaningful post-work society therefore requires changing the present political conditions. In turn, this requires the left to face squarely up to the dismal situation before it: trade unions lying in ruin, political parties rendered into neoliberal puppets, and a waning intellectual and cultural hegemony. State and corporate repression of the left has significantly intensified in recent decades, legal changes have made it more

difficult to organise, generalised precarity has made us more insecure, and the militarisation of policing has rapidly gathered speed.<sup>1</sup> And beyond this lies the fact that our inner lives, our social world and our built environment are organised around work and its continuation. The shift to a post-work society, much like the shift to a decarbonised economy, is not just a matter of overcoming a few elite interests. More fundamentally, it is a matter of transforming society from the ground up. An engagement with the totality of power and capital is inevitable, and we should be under no illusions about the difficulties facing such a project. If full transformational change is not immediately possible, our efforts must be directed towards cracking open those spaces of possibility that do exist and fostering better political conditions over time. We must first reach a space within which more radical demands can be meaningfully articulated, and must therefore prepare for the long term if we wish to alter the terrain of politics substantially.

This ought not to be entirely unexpected. Capitalism did not emerge all at once, but instead percolated to a position of dominance over the course of centuries.<sup>2</sup> A large number of components had to be put in place: landless labourers, widespread commodity production, private property, technical sophistication, centralisation of wealth, a bourgeois class, a work ethic, and so on. These historical conditions are the components that enabled the systemic logic of capitalism eventually to gain traction in the world. The lesson here is that, just as capitalism relied upon the accumulation of a particular set of components, so too will postcapitalism. It will neither emerge all at once nor in the wake of some revolutionary moment. The task of the left must be to work out the conditions for postcapitalism and to struggle to build them on a continually expanding scale.

This chapter therefore begins from the premise that the contemporary left is in a dire situation and that any transformative project will take time. We limit our analysis here largely to Western capitalist democracies, with their peculiar apparatuses of political and economic power. We will mostly leave aside the immense (and immensely important) regions of the rest of the world.<sup>3</sup> However, it is worth reiterating that the problems of automation and surplus populations are global in nature, and the grounds for post-work are flourishing around the world – as demonstrated by recent experiments with basic incomes in India and Namibia, the surge in industrial automation across the most populous regions of the world, and the ‘spontaneous

emergence of movements against work in numerous countries. Though these dynamics are global, any political project to transform this situation will necessarily need to respond to particular conditions on the ground. While certain core principles will be translatable between contexts, they will need to be realised differently under different circumstances. With these qualifications in mind, how can a better future be built? The classic Leninist strategy of building dual power with a revolutionary party and overthrowing the state is obsolete.<sup>4</sup> Proponents of the Bolshevik Revolution model appear more useful as historical re-enactors than as guides for contemporary politics. Likewise, the recent history of revolutions – from the Iranian Revolution to the Arab Spring – has simply led to some combination of theocratic authoritarianism, military dictatorship and civil war. The electoral reformist approach is equally a failure. The idea of voting in a new world mutated into a convivial elite consensus during the postwar era and became ensconced within neoliberal ideology in recent decades. At its best, such reformism is doomed simply to ameliorate capitalism and act as a type of politically mediated homeostatic system. And as the latest cycle of struggles has shown, the folk-political approach of prioritising various forms of immediacy has failed to transform society. Piecemeal efforts, defensive struggles, withdrawals and prefigurative pockets of activity have been largely incapable of stemming the tide, let alone gaining ground on global capitalism. Equally, it remains insufficient simply to posit that progress will be worked out in practice or that the masses will spontaneously create a better world.<sup>5</sup> While there are undoubtedly elements of luck and unpredictability in any struggle, the difficulty of building a new world demands that strategic thought be carried out in advance. Our efforts must be organised strategically along broad lines, rather than dissipating into a series of partial and disconnected achievements. As modernity asserts, progress towards a better future comes on the back of deliberate reflection and conscious action.

Given the limits of these other approaches, we argue that the best way forward is a counter-hegemonic strategy. This is a strategy that is adaptable from positions of weakness, is scalable from the local to the global, and recognises the hold that capitalism has over every aspect of our lives, from our most intimate desires to the most abstract financial flows. A counter-hegemonic strategy entails a project to overturn the dominant neoliberal common sense and rejuvenate the collective imagination. Fundamentally, it is an attempt to

install a new common sense – one organised around the crisis of work and its effects on the proletariat. In this, it involves preparatory work for moments when full-scale struggle erupts, transforming our social imagination and reconfiguring our sense of what is possible. It builds up support and a common language for a new world, seeking to alter the balance of power in preparation for when a crisis upsets the legitimacy of society. Unlike forms of folk politics, such a strategy is expansive, long-term, comfortable with abstraction and complexity, and aimed at overthrowing capitalist universalism.<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, we examine three possible sites of struggle – over the intellectual, cultural and technological mediums of neoliberal hegemony. The next section will examine hegemony at a theoretical level, while the rest of the chapter will explore illustrations of how a counter-hegemonic project might be put into practice – through utopian narratives, pluralist economics and the repurposing of technologies.

## ENGINEERING CONSENT

The idea of ‘hegemony’ initially emerged as a way of explaining why ordinary people were not revolting against capitalism.<sup>7</sup> According to the traditional Marxist narrative, workers would become increasingly aware of the exploitative nature of capitalism and eventually organise to transcend it. Capitalism, it was believed, ought to be producing an ever more polarised world of capitalists versus the working class, in a process that underpinned a political strategy in which the organised working class would win control over the state through revolutionary means. But by the 1920s it was clear that this was not about to happen in western European democratic societies. How was it, then, that capitalism and the interests of the ruling classes were secured in democratic societies largely devoid of overt force? The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci answered that capitalist power was dependent on what he termed hegemony – the engineering of consent according to the dictates of one particular group. A hegemonic project builds a ‘common sense’ that installs the particular worldview of one group as the universal horizon of an entire society. By this means, hegemony enables a group to lead and rule over a society primarily through consent (both active and passive) rather than coercion.<sup>8</sup> This consent can be achieved in a variety of ways: the formation of explicit political alliances with other social groups, the dissemination of

cultural values supporting a particular way of organising society (for example, the work ethic instilled by the media and through education), the alignment of interests between classes (for example, workers are better off when a capitalist economy is growing, 'even if this means mass inequality and environmental devastation) and through building technologies and infrastructures in such a way that they silently constrain social conflict (for example, by widening streets to prevent the erection of barricades during insurrections). In a broad and diffuse sense, hegemony enables relatively small groups of capitalists to 'lead' society as a whole, even when their material interests are at odds with those of the majority. Finally, as well as securing active and passive consent, hegemonic projects also deploy coercive means, such as imprisonment, police violence and intimidation, to neutralise those groups that cannot otherwise be led.<sup>9</sup> Taken together, these measures enable small groups to influence the general direction of a society, sometimes through the achievement and deployment of state power, but also outside the confines of the state.

The latter point is particularly important, because hegemony is not just a strategy of governance for those in power, but also a strategy for the marginal to transform society. A counter-hegemonic project enables marginal and oppressed groups to transform the balance of power in a society and bring about a new common sense. To abjure hegemony therefore implies an abandonment of the basic idea of winning and exercising power, and is to effectively give up on the primary terrain of political struggle.<sup>10</sup> While there are some on the left who explicitly endorse such a position,<sup>11</sup> to the degree that horizontalist movements have been successful they have tended to operate as a counter-hegemonic force. Occupy's major success – transforming the public discourse around inequality – is a prime example of this. A counter-hegemonic project will therefore seek to overturn an existing set of alliances, common sense, and rule by consent in order to install a new hegemony.<sup>12</sup> Such a project will seek to build the social conditions from which a new post-work world can emerge and will require an expansive approach that goes beyond the temporary and local measures of folk politics. It requires mobilisation across different social groups,<sup>13</sup> which means linking together a diversity of individual interests into a common desire for a post-work society. The neoliberal hegemony in the United States, for instance, came about by

linking together the interests of economic liberals with those of social conservatives. This is a fractious (sometimes even contradictory) alliance, but it is one that finds common interests in the broad neoliberal framework by emphasising individual freedoms.<sup>14</sup> In addition, counter-hegemonic projects operate across diverse fields – from the state, to civil society, to the material infrastructure. This means an entire battery of actions are needed, such as seeking to spread media influence, attempting to win state power, controlling key sectors of the economy and designing important infrastructures. This project requires empirical and experimental work to identify the parts of these various fields that are operating to reinforce the present general direction of society. The Mont Pelerin Society is a good example of this. Painstakingly aware of the ways in which Keynesianism was the hegemonic common sense of its time, the MPS undertook the long-term task of taking apart the elements that sustained it. This was a project that took decades to come to full fruition, and during that time the MPS had to undertake counter-hegemonic actions in order to install it. Such long-term thinking is an important corrective to the tendency today to focus on immediate resistance and new daily outrages. However, hegemony is not just an immaterial contestation of ideas and values. Neoliberalism's ideological hegemony, for example, depends upon a series of material instantiations – paradigmatically in the nexus of government power, media framing and the network of neoliberal think tanks. As we observed in our examination of the rise of neoliberalism, the MPS was particularly adept at creating an intellectual infrastructure, consisting of the institutions and material paths necessary to inculcate, embody and spread their worldview.

The combination of social alliances, strategic thinking, ideological work and institutions builds a capacity to alter public discourse. Crucial here is the idea of the 'Overton window' – this is the bandwidth of ideas and options that can be 'realistically' discussed by politicians, public intellectuals and news media, and thus accepted by the public.<sup>15</sup> The general window of realistic options emerges out of a complex nexus of causes – who controls key nodes in the press and broadcast media, the relative impact of popular culture, the relative balance of power between organised labour and capitalists, who holds executive political power, and so on. Though emerging from the intersection of different elements, the Overton window has a power of its own to shape which future paths are taken by societies and governments. If something

is not deemed ‘realistic’, then it will not even be tabled for discussion and its proponents will be silenced as ‘unserious’. We can evaluate the success of neoliberal ideas in terms of this by the degree to which they have framed what is possible over a period of more than thirty years.<sup>16</sup> While it has never been possible to convince the majority of the population of the positive merits of key neoliberal policies, active assent is unnecessary. A sequence of neoliberal administrations throughout the world, in conjunction with a network of think tanks and a largely right-leaning media, have been able to transform the range of possible options to exclude even the most moderate of socialist measures.<sup>17</sup> Through this, the hegemony of neoliberal ideas has enabled the exercise of power without always requiring executive state power. Providing that the window of possible options can be stretched further to the right, it matters little whether right-wing governments hold power – a reality that the US Republican Party has consistently exploited over the last two decades, often to the surprise of those on the liberal left. Ideological hegemony as we present it here is therefore not about maintaining a strict party line on what can be discussed. Simply bringing leftist issues and categories into positions of prominence would already be a major step forward.

While often understood as something that pertains to ideas, values and other immaterial aspects of society, there is in fact also a material sense to hegemony. The physical infrastructures of our world exert a significant hegemonic force upon societies – imposing a way of life without overt coercion. For instance, with regard to urban infrastructure, David Harvey writes that ‘projects concerning what we want our cities to be are . . . projects concerning human possibilities, who we want, or perhaps even more pertinently, who we do not want to become’.<sup>18</sup> Infrastructure such as suburbs in the United States was built with the explicit intention of isolating and individualising existing solidarity networks, and installing a gendered division between the private and the public in the form of single-family households.<sup>19</sup> Economic infrastructures also serve to modify and sculpt human behaviours. Indeed, technical infrastructures are often developed for political as well as economic purposes. If we think of global just-in-time supply chains, for example, these are economically efficient under capitalism, but also exceptionally effective in breaking the power of unions. In other words, hegemony, or rule by the engineering of consent, is as much a material force as it is a social one. It is something embedded in human minds, social and political organisations,

individual technologies and the built environment that constitutes our world.<sup>20</sup> And, whereas the social forces of hegemony must be continually maintained, the materialised aspects of hegemony exert a force of momentum that lasts long past their initial creation.<sup>21</sup> Once in place, infrastructures are difficult to dislodge or alter, despite changing political conditions. We are facing up to this problem now, for example, with the infrastructure built up around fossil fuels. Our economies are organised around the production, distribution and consumption of coal, oil and gas, making it immensely difficult to decarbonise the economy. The flipside of that problem, though, is that once a postcapitalist infrastructure is in place, it would be just as difficult to shift away from it, regardless of any reactionary forces. Technology and technological infrastructures therefore pose both significant hurdles for overcoming the capitalist mode of production, as well as significant potentials for securing the longevity of an alternative. This is why, for example, it is insufficient even to have a massive populist movement against the current forms of capitalism. Without a new approach to things like production and distribution technologies, every social movement will find itself forced back into capitalistic practices.

The left must therefore develop a sociotechnical hegemony: both in the sphere of ideas and ideology, and in the sphere of material infrastructures. The objective of such a strategy, in a very broad sense, is to navigate the present technical, economic, social, political and productive hegemony towards a new point of equilibrium beyond the imposition of wage labour. This will require long-term and experimental praxis on multiple fronts. A hegemonic project therefore implies and responds to society as a complex emergent order, the result of diverse interacting practices.<sup>22</sup> Some combinations of social practices will lead to instability, but others will tend towards more stable (if not literally static) outcomes. In this context, hegemonic politics is the work that goes into retaining or navigating towards a new point of relative stability across a variety of societal subsystems, from the national-level politics of the state, to the economic domain, from the battle of ideas and ideologies to different regimes of technology. The order which emerges as a result of the interactions of these different domains is hegemony, which works to constrain certain kinds of action and enable others. In the rest of this chapter, we examine three possible channels through which to undertake this struggle: pluralising economics, creating utopian narratives and repurposing technology. These certainly do

not exhaust the points of possible attack, but they do identify potentially productive areas to focus resources on.

## **REMEMBERING THE FUTURE**

Today, one of the most pervasive and subtle aspects of hegemony is the limitations it imposes upon our collective imagination. The mantra ‘there is no alternative’ continues to ring true, even as more and more people strive against it. This marks a significant change from the long twentieth century, when utopian imaginaries and grandiose plans for the future flourished. Images of space flight, for instance, were constant ciphers for humanity’s desire to control its destiny.<sup>23</sup> In pre-Soviet Russia, there was remarkably widespread fascination with space exploration. Though aviation was still a novelty, the dreams of space flight promised ‘total liberation from the signifiers of the past: social injustice, imperfection, gravity, and ultimately, the Earth’.<sup>24</sup> The utopian inclinations of the time made sense of the rapidly changing world, gave credence to the belief that humanity could channel history in a rational direction and cultivated anticipations for a future society. In the more mystical formulations, cosmists argued with admirable ambition that geoengineering and space exploration were only partial steps towards the real goal: resurrecting the entirety of the dead.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, more secular approaches outlined detailed plans for fully automated economies, mass economic democracy, the end of class society and the flourishing of humanity.<sup>26</sup> Such was the level of enthusiasm and belief in imminent space travel that in 1924 a riot nearly erupted when rumours circulated about a possible rocket flight to the moon.<sup>27</sup> Popular culture was saturated with these images and with stories in which technological and social revolution intertwined. But these were not simply matters of extraterrestrial fantasy, as they had concrete effects on people’s ways of living. In the post-revolutionary period, this culture of ambition fostered a series of social experiments with new ways of communal living, domestic arrangements and political formations.<sup>28</sup> These experiments gave credence to the idea that anything was achievable in a time of rapid modernisation, lending support to the Bolsheviks and the people. While utopian ambitions were largely forced underground during the Stalinist era, they re-emerged in the 1950s with the growth of newfound economic confidence and the resources to make good on some of

the earlier dreams.<sup>29</sup> The greatest moments of the Soviet experiment – the launch of Sputnik and the economic dominance that it appeared on the verge of attaining in the 1950s – were ultimately inseparable from a popular culture imbued with utopian desires.<sup>30</sup> A similar period of utopian ambition also held sway in the early years of the United States. Fuelled by a widespread belief that the new industrial capitalism was temporary and that a better world would soon emerge, workers militantly struggled for this new world. In a climate far more hostile than our own, labour was able to create an array of strong organisations and exert significant pressure.<sup>31</sup> The successes of this time were inseparable from a broader utopian culture.

By contrast, today's world remains firmly confined within the parameters of capitalist realism.<sup>32</sup> The future has been cancelled. We are more prone to believing that ecological collapse is imminent, increased militarisation inevitable, and rising inequality unstoppable. Contemporary science fiction is dominated by a dystopian mindset, more intent on charting the decline of the world than the possibilities for a better one.<sup>33</sup> Utopias, when they are proposed, have to be rigorously justified in instrumental terms, rather than allowed to exist in excess of any calculation. Meanwhile, in the halls of academia the utopian impulse has been castigated as naive and futile. Browbeaten by decades of failure, the left has consistently retreated from its traditionally grand ambitions. To give but one example: whereas the 1970s saw radical feminism and queer manifestos calling for a fundamentally new society, by the 1990s these had been reduced to a more moderate identity politics; and by the 2000s discussions were dominated by even milder demands to have same-sex marriage recognised and for women to have equal opportunities to become CEOs.<sup>34</sup> Today, the space of radical hope has come to be occupied by a supposedly sceptical maturity and a widespread cynical reason.<sup>35</sup> And the goals of an ambitious left, which once aimed at the total transformation of society, have been reduced down to minor tinkering at the edges of society.

We believe that an ambitious left is essential to a post-work programme, and that to achieve this, the future must be remembered and rebuilt.<sup>36</sup> Utopias are the embodiment of the superstitions of progress. They demand that the future be realised, they form an impossible but necessary object of desire, and they give us a language of hope and aspiration for a better world. The denunciations of utopia's fantasies overlook the fact that it is precisely the element of imagination that makes utopias essential to any process of

political change. If we want to escape from the present, we must first dismiss the settled parameters of the future and wrench open a new horizon of possibility. Without the belief in a different future, radical political thinking will be excluded from the beginning.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, utopian ideas have been central to every major moment of liberation – from early liberalism, to socialisms of all stripes, to feminism and anti-colonial nationalism. Cosmism, afro-futurism, dreams of immortality, and space exploration – all of these signal a universal impulse towards utopian thinking. Even the neoliberal revolution cultivated the desire for an alternative liberal utopia in the face of a dominant Keynesian consensus. But any competing left utopias have gone sorely under-resourced since the collapse of the Soviet Union. We therefore argue that the left must release the utopian impulse from its neoliberal shackles in order to expand the space of the possible, mobilise a critical perspective on the present moment and cultivate new desires.

First, utopian thought rigorously analyses the current conjuncture and projects its tendencies out into the future.<sup>38</sup> Whereas scientific approaches attempt to reduce discussions of the future to fit within a probabilistic framework, utopian thought recognises that the future is radically open. What may appear impossible today might become eminently possible. At their best, utopias include tensions and dynamism within themselves, rather than presenting a static image of a perfected society. While irreducible to instrumental concerns, utopias also foster the imagination of ideas that might be implemented when conditions change. For example, the nineteenth-century Russian cosmists were among the first to think seriously about the social implications and potentials of space flight. Initially considered ineffectual dreamers, they ended up heavily influencing the future science of rocketry.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, early science fiction dealing with space exploration and cosmist utopias went on to influence state policy towards science and technology in the wake of the Russian Revolution.<sup>40</sup> The creation of alternatives also makes it possible to recognise that another world is possible in the first place.<sup>41</sup> As the flawed but significant global alternative posed by the USSR disappears from living memory, such images of a different world become increasingly important, widening the Overton window and experimenting with ideas about what might be achieved under different conditions.

In elaborating an image of the future, utopian thought also generates a viewpoint from which the present becomes open to critique.<sup>42</sup> It suspends the

appearance of the present as inevitable and brings to light aspects of the world that would otherwise go unnoticed, raising questions that must be constitutively excluded.<sup>43</sup> Recent US science fiction, for instance, has often been written in response to contemporary issues of race, gender and class, while early Russian utopias imagined worlds that overcame the problems posed by rapid urbanisation and conflicting ethnicities.<sup>44</sup> These worlds not only model solutions, but illuminate problems. As Slavoj Žižek notes in his discussion of Thomas Piketty, the seemingly modest demand to implement a global tax actually implies a radical reorganisation of the entire global political structure.<sup>45</sup> Implicit within this small claim is a utopian impulse, since the conditions for making it possible require such a fundamental reconfiguration of existing circumstances. Likewise, the demand for a universal basic income provides a perspective from which the social nature of work, its invisible domestic aspect and its extension to every area of our lives become more readily apparent. The ways we organise our worklives, families and communities are given a fresh appearance when viewed from the perspective of a post-work world. Why do we devote one-third of our lives in submission to someone else? Why do we insist that domestic work (performed primarily by women) go unpaid? Why are our cities organised around lengthy, dreary commutes from the suburbs? The utopian demand from the future therefore implores us to question the givens of our world. In these ways, utopias can be both a negation of the present and an affirmation of a possible future.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, in affirming the future, utopia functions as an affective modulator: it manipulates and modifies our desires and feelings, at both conscious and pre-conscious levels. In all its variations, utopia ultimately concerns the 'education of desire'.<sup>47</sup> It provides a frame for us, telling us both how and what to desire, while unleashing these libidinal elements from the bounds of the reasonable. Utopias give us something to aim for – something beyond the stale repetition of the same offered by the eternal present of capitalism. In cracking open the present and providing an image of a better future, the space between the present and the future becomes the space for hope and the desire for *more*.<sup>48</sup> By generating and channelling these affects, utopian thinking can become a spur to action, a catalyst for change; it disrupts habits and breaks down consent to the existing order.<sup>49</sup> Futural thinking, extended by communications mechanisms,<sup>50</sup> generates collective affects of hope that mobilise people to act on behalf of a better future – affects that are necessary

to any political project.<sup>51</sup> While utopian thinking rejects the melancholy and transcendental miserabilism found in some parts of the contemporary left, it also invokes its own negative affect.<sup>52</sup> The obverse of hope is disappointment (an affect that is today embodied in figures like the young ‘graduate with no future’).<sup>53</sup> Whereas anger has traditionally been the dominant affect of the militant left, disappointment invokes a more productive relation – not merely a willed transformation of the status quo, but also a desire for what-might-be. Disappointment indexes a yearning for a lost future.

If the left is to counter the common sense of neoliberalism ('there's not enough money', 'everyone must work', 'government is inefficient'), utopian thinking will be essential. We need to think big. The natural habitat of the left has always been the future, and this terrain must be reclaimed. In our neoliberal era, the drive for a better world has largely been whittled away under the pressures and demands of everyday existence. In this repression, what has been lost is that ambition to produce 'a world that exceeds – existentially, aesthetically, as well as politically – the miserable confines of bourgeois culture'.<sup>54</sup> But as an apparently universal and irrepressible characteristic of human cultures, utopian thinking can surge forth under even the most repressive conditions.<sup>55</sup> Utopian inclinations play out across the human spectrum of feelings and affects – embodied in popular culture, high culture, fashion, city planning, and even quotidian daydreaming.<sup>56</sup> The popular desire for space exploration, for instance, points to a curiosity and ambition that lies beyond the profit motive.<sup>57</sup> The like-minded trend of afro-futurism offers not only a highly stylised image of a better future, but also ties it to a radical critique of existing structures of oppression and a remembrance of past struggles. The post-work imaginary also contains numerous historical precedents in utopian writing, pointing to a constant striving to move beyond the constraints of wage labour. Cultural movements and aesthetic production have essential roles to play in reigniting the desire for utopia and inspiring visions of a different world.

## **NAVIGATING NEOLIBERALISM**

While utopias seek to transform the cultural hegemony of neoliberalism, education forms a key institution for transforming intellectual hegemony. It is the educational apparatus that indoctrinates new generations in the

dominant values of a particular society, reproducing its ideology through the decades. In the education system, children learn the basic ideas of a society, respect for (in fact, submission to) the existing order, and the skills necessary to distribute them along different segments of the labour market.<sup>58</sup> Transforming the educational system of intellectuals is therefore a key task in building a new hegemony.<sup>59</sup> It is not for nothing that the Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Samuelson wrote that: 'I don't care who writes a nation's laws, or crafts its advanced treatises, if I can write its economics textbooks.' Projects focused on changing this institutional element of society could focus on three broad goals: pluralising the teaching of economics, reinvigorating the study of leftist economics and expanding popular economic literacy.

It is often forgotten, so deeply are we embedded in neoliberalism, that economics was once a relatively pluralist discipline. The interwar period was a time of healthy competition between a variety of formalist and non-formalist approaches.<sup>60</sup> In academic journals, it was not unusual to see discussions of economic planning, the tendency for the rate of profit to fall, and other standard categories of Marxist economics. In the 1960s, the Cambridge capital controversy brought together heterodox and mainstream thinkers in a seminal debate about the foundations of the discipline – one that everyone admits the heterodox thinkers won.<sup>61</sup> As late as the 1970s, one of the founders of modern economics was discussing exploitation, the labour theory of value and the transformation problem in a leading economics journal.<sup>62</sup> Such an event is difficult to imagine today. While neoclassical economics is a large tent that contains a variety of approaches, it is nevertheless a fundamentally limited perspective on what counts as real economic knowledge. This problem is compounded by the particular methodological demands of the most preeminent journals, with formal modelling taking precedence over more sociological analyses and qualitative understandings.

If the broad cultural and academic ideas of how to run economies are to change, at a minimum it will require more pluralism in the education of students. Here, there are glimmers of hope for a pluralist revival. Work is being done across the world to bring alternative economics to mainstream universities, and groups of students and professionals alike are beginning to mobilise around this issue. Since 2000, numerous universities have seen students vocally demand pluralism in their economics education.<sup>63</sup> More recent years have seen students openly protesting the defenders of mainstream

economics, and the emergence of groups like the Post-Crash Economic Society and Rethinking Economics that are making concerted efforts to change the curriculum.<sup>64</sup> Essential to a project of pluralising economics, however, is the development of a research programme and textbooks. Part of the reason for the rise of formalist approaches is precisely their fit with institutional requirements of higher education: they provided theories for researchers to spend time testing, textbooks and PhDs to continue a lineage of thought, and clear and transmissible principles.<sup>65</sup> Today, the field has come to be dominated by neoclassical textbooks, and the result is that, even if professors want to pluralise the discipline, they do not have many accessible resources to hand.<sup>66</sup> Indications that this might be changing include the creation of a heterodox textbook by two proponents of modern monetary theory.<sup>67</sup> But more work needs to be done on this front in order to broaden the parochial horizons of mainstream economics.

To support this process, there should be a movement to rejuvenate leftist economics. The dearth of economic analysis on the left could be seen in the wake of the 2008 crisis, when the most prominent critical response was a makeshift Keynesianism. The left was largely without a meaningful and desirable economic programme, having focused primarily on the critique of capitalism rather than the elaboration of alternatives. This is a crisis of utopian imagination, but also of cognitive limits. A series of emerging contemporary phenomena must be thought through carefully: for instance, the causes and effects of secular stagnation; the transformations invoked by the shift to an informational, post-scarcity economy; the changes wrought by the introduction of full automation and a universal basic income; the possible approaches to collectivising automated manufacturing and services; the progressive potentials of alternative approaches to quantitative easing; the most effective ways to decarbonise the means of production; the implications of dark pools for financial instability – and so on. Equally, research should be revived on what postcapitalism might look like in practice. Beyond a few outdated classics, very little research has been done to think through an alternative economic system – even less so in the wake of emerging technologies like additive manufacturing, self-driving vehicles and soft AI.<sup>68</sup> What role, for instance, could non-state cryptocurrencies have? How does one measure value if not by abstract or concrete labour? How can ecological concerns be fully accounted for in a postcapitalist economic framework? What mechanism

can replace the market and overcome the socialist calculation problem?<sup>69</sup> And what are the likely effects of the possible tendency for the rate of profit to fall?<sup>70</sup> Building a postcapitalist world is as much a technical task as a political one; and in order to begin thinking about it, the left needs to overcome its general aversion to formal modelling and mathematics. There is no small amount of irony in the fact that the same people who criticise the abstraction of mathematical modelling often adhere to the most abstract dialectical readings of capitalism. This recognition of the uses of quantitative methods does not mean simply adopting neoclassical models or slavishly following the dictates of numbers, but the rigour and computational elaboration that can come with formal modelling are essential for grappling with the complexity of the economy.<sup>71</sup> However, from modern monetary theory to complexity economics, from ecological to participatory economics, trajectories of innovative thought are being launched – even if they remain marginal for now. Equally, organisations like the New Economics Foundation are leading the way in creating models of the economy that can inform leftist political goals, as well as fostering public literacy in economic matters.

The latter point is particularly important, as increasing economic literacy means not only transforming the practice of academic economists, but also making the economy intelligible to non-specialists. Sophisticated analyses of economic trends need to be connected to the intuitive insights of everyday lives. While, for the near future, the revival of leftist economics is likely to be centred in academia, the aim should be to spread such economics education far beyond the confines of universities. Unions could use their resources to educate their members about the changing nature of the contemporary economy. Through internal education programmes, rank-and-file workers can begin to situate the problems of their workplaces and communities within a larger economic context. Similar approaches can be – and in many cases already are – achieved through the training of activists. Open schools provide another medium for education, giving the public a chance to learn about ideas that are too often made impenetrable by academic jargon, and from which they are excluded by exorbitant tuition and publisher fees. There is a long tradition in the UK of working-class education, which can be drawn upon to learn from. For example, the Workers' Educational Association already provides low-cost adult education to local communities.<sup>72</sup> Such institutions provide ways in which abstract economic understandings can be

linked up with the on-the-ground knowledge of workers, activists and community members, each mutually shaping the other. Working systematically to develop pluralism, economic research and public education will play a significant role in strengthening the utopian narratives outlined in the previous section, and providing the necessary navigational tools to chart a course out of capitalism.

## REPURPOSING TECHNOLOGY

As we argued above, hegemony is embedded not only in the ideas of a society, but also in the built environment and technologies that surround us. These objects carry a politics within them: they facilitate particular uses and actions, while simultaneously constraining others. For instance, our current infrastructure tends to shape our societies into individualistic, carbon-based, competitive forms, regardless of what individuals or collectives may want. The significance of these politicised infrastructures is only increasing as technology expands into the smallest nano-scales and out to the largest post-planetary formations. No aspect of our lives remains untouched by technology, and indeed, many would argue that humanity is intrinsically technological.<sup>73</sup> In response to this materialised hegemony – one thoroughly constructed by and implicated in capitalism – a few different options present themselves. A first position argues we must destroy this built environment in order to ever liberate ourselves.<sup>74</sup> While this argument reaches its zenith in primitivism and its demand to be done with civilisation, similar inclinations permeate the left today. Given the devastation such a project would bring about, and the theoretical ineptitude behind these claims, we consider this position little more than an academic curiosity. A second position instead argues that technology is the basis for a postcapitalist order, but that any meaningful focus on changing our technology should wait until after the political project of post-capitalism is achieved.<sup>75</sup> This would undoubtedly make our task simpler, but, given the pervasive entanglement of technology with politics, and given the latent potentials in current technology, we believe the far more prudent option is to look at how developments can be redirected today, and existing technology repurposed immediately. A third approach therefore focuses on invention and emphasises that the choice of which technologies to develop and how they are designed is primarily a political matter.<sup>76</sup> The direction of

technological development is determined not only by technical and economic considerations, but also by political intentions. More than just seizing the means of production, this approach declares the need to invent new means of production. A final approach focuses on how existing technology contains occluded potentials that strain at our current horizon and how they might be repurposed.<sup>77</sup> Under capitalism, technology's potential is drastically constrained – reduced to a mere vehicle for generating profit and controlling workers. Yet potentials continue to exist in excess of these current uses.<sup>78</sup> The task before us is to uncover the hidden potentials and link them up to scalable processes of change. This is ultimately a utopian intervention, insofar as repurposing aims to ignite collective imagination about what can be done with the resources to hand.<sup>79</sup>

We have, therefore, two effective strategies in approaching the question of technological hegemony. In the first approach, the focus is on the invention and adoption of new technologies, emphasising that we can create tools of change. In this vein, some have called for greater democratic control over the design and implementation of infrastructures and technologies.<sup>80</sup> In the workplace, this means struggling over which technologies are brought in and how they are used. Given that technologies are rarely, if ever, introduced all at once, there is a lengthy period of time in which to leverage power to gain control over how technologies are being developed and implemented. The rejection of surveillance measures is one of the most obvious goals, but workplace struggle also means resisting technologies which simply intensify, speed up and worsen working conditions.<sup>81</sup> At the level of the state, there is an equally strong case to be made for democratic control over technology development, given that most significant innovations come from public-sector financing rather than the private sector. It is the state that leads significant technological revolutions – from the internet to green technology, nanotechnology, the algorithm at the heart of Google's search engine, and all of the major components of Apple's iPhone and iPad.<sup>82</sup> The microprocessor, the touchscreen, the GPS, the batteries, the hard drive and SIRI are just a few of the components that emerged from government investment.<sup>83</sup> The fact of the matter is that capitalist markets tend towards short-term views and low-risk investments. It is governments that provide the long-term resources that enable major innovative changes to develop and flourish, whereas contemporary venture capital increasingly tends towards the generation of short-term

profit.<sup>84</sup> It is governments that make investments in high-risk developments that are likely to fail – but for that reason are also likely to lead to major changes. Given government's role in technological development and consumer product innovation, public funding should be under democratic control. This would mean that governments have a role to play not only in the *rate* of technological development, but more importantly in its *direction*.<sup>85</sup> Particularly significant here are what have been called 'mission-oriented' projects.<sup>86</sup> These do not aim at product differentiation and marginal improvements to existing goods, but are instead concerned with large-scale inventive projects such as space travel and the internet. This is revolutionary development, aimed at creating entirely new paths of technology and open to the possibility of unexpected innovations emerging in the process. Under democratic control, it could respond to the biggest social problems of the day and foster large-scale thinking by, for instance, using state investment banks to shape the social value of projects through funding decisions.<sup>87</sup> A forward-thinking government could support mission-oriented projects such as decarbonising the economy, fully automating work, expanding cheap renewable energy,<sup>88</sup> exploring synthetic biology, developing cheap medicine, supporting space exploration and building artificial intelligence. The challenge is to develop institutional mechanisms that will enable popular control over the direction of technological creation.

Public control over how government funds are spent for development was also at the heart of a series of worker-based struggles in the 1970s. In now largely forgotten experiments, workers in the UK and Japan (and later across Brazil, India and Argentina) sought to channel technological development towards the production of 'socially useful goods'.<sup>89</sup> These were goods that responded to social needs and were produced in such a way as to minimise waste, be ecologically sustainable, and respect workers and their skills.<sup>90</sup> The most influential of these projects occurred at Lucas Aerospace in the UK – a company that focused on producing high-tech components, predominantly for the military, and received significant government funding.<sup>91</sup> Faced with rising structural unemployment and impending redundancies, workers at Lucas Aerospace came together to develop an alternative proposal for how to run the company and maintain jobs. Their basic argument was that, given the public funds being channelled into the corporation, society should have a say in, and benefit from, how these resources were being used. This was an

argument that entailed channelling resources away from military armaments and into useful products. In order to develop the proposal for socially useful goods, the workers compiled a list of the skills and equipment available to them, took on the perspective of planners, sought product suggestions from workers and their communities, and collectively decided how these technologies and skills could be repurposed to different ends.<sup>92</sup> Rather than high-tech military equipment, the existing capacities were to be repurposed to design and produce medical technologies, renewable energy, safety improvements, and heating technology for social housing.<sup>93</sup> The final plan ran to over 1,200 pages and included detailed proposals for 150 products.<sup>94</sup> In order for it to achieve its political goals against an intransigent management, the strategy undertaken was in many ways a counter-hegemonic project, with workers explicitly aiming to ‘inflame the imaginations of others’ and revise what people thought production was for.<sup>95</sup>

Notably, the Lucas Plan refused to remain a temporary space of prefigurative politics, and instead aimed to mobilise the resources of unions and governments in an effort to create a new hegemonic order. In this endeavour, the plan resonated with peace activists, environmentalists, feminists and other labour movements, leading to the building of international connections and a wave of worker-led action.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, however, the stagnation of the Labour Party and national trade unions, combined with the rising turn to neoliberalism, meant that the Lucas Plan fell short of its goals. But the successes it had – slowing job losses – were largely the result of moving beyond defensive approaches and towards creating an alternative.<sup>97</sup> Despite these failures, the Lucas Plan demonstrates a clear example of how repurposing the productive forces of society might be used to transform the technological direction of society. This was not an attempt simply to build a worker-controlled factory in the middle of a profit-orientated economy; more radically, it was an attempt to reorganise technological development away from marginal weapon improvements and towards socially useful goods.<sup>98</sup> It is an ideal model of how technical knowledge, political awareness and collective power can be combined to achieve a radical repurposing of the material world.

An even more ambitious project of repurposing occurred in Chile in the early 1970s. The newly elected government of Salvador Allende sought to transform Chile into a socialist nation through gradualist change,

implemented through the existing economic and political institutions. A crucial part of this process was the development of Cybersyn, an innovative attempt at decentralised economic planning that sought to connect firms throughout the country to government and bureaucratic functions. The project involved transforming cybernetics from what has often been excoriated as a system of control<sup>99</sup> into an infrastructure of democratic socialism. The Cybersyn system was designed not for an omnipotent and external central government, but as a partial and internal modulator of ongoing economic flows.<sup>100</sup> It was intended to give workers a say in the planning process and enable factories to self-manage, all while giving a rational orientation to the national economy. To achieve these goals, Cybersyn was to include a proto-internet connecting factories, an economic simulator to test out policies, a statistical forecaster to predict problems, and an operations room taken straight from science fiction. But US hostility to the country made it virtually impossible to purchase new computers, and attempted deals with France only came to fruition after Allende had been overthrown.<sup>101</sup> The result was that Chile's effort to build a cybernetic socialism largely had to repurpose existing technologies in order to stand any chance at being successful. It was a sort of bricolage approach, using what was available and cobbling together something new. At the time, Chile possessed only four mainframe computers (only one of which was available to Cybersyn)<sup>102</sup> and fifty computers around the nation – so the proto-internet was pared down, and based instead on more widely available telex machines. The ambition for a system of democratic, worker-managed enterprises was ultimately cut short by the US-backed coup that ended Allende's regime in 1973. But while the project was never fully realised, parts of Cybersyn nevertheless demonstrated their potential in one notable experience. Faced with rising opposition from the economic elite, in 1972 the government had to deal with a strike by over 40,000 truck owners.<sup>103</sup> The petite bourgeoisie sought to undermine the government by preventing shipping of essential materials for factory production. But workers took over factories and continued to drive trucks wherever possible, while the national government deployed the telex network of Cybersyn in order to coordinate around the blockades and the strike. Effectively, as the preeminent historian of Cybersyn writes, 'the network offered a communications infrastructure to link the revolution from above, led by Allende, to the revolution from below, led by Chilean workers and

members of grassroots organisations'.<sup>104</sup> In other words, the strike showed the potential of Cybersyn for repurposing the infrastructure of society towards democratic and socialist ends. It enabled a historically unique and promising vision of what an alternative future might have looked like. In the end, therefore, the experiment provides an imaginative and utopian example of the repurposing of cybernetic principles, existing Chilean technology and cutting-edge software.<sup>105</sup>

While the previous examples suggest how repurposing could be the focus of immediate political projects, more speculative propositions can also be imagined for a postcapitalist future. As a central source of productivity and the expansion of our capacities to act, technological innovations form an essential part of any mode of production beyond capitalism. A new world will have to be built, not on the ruins of the old, but on the most advanced elements of the present. Today we see the occluded potentials of this approach everywhere, in the fact that the technologies for achieving classic leftist goals (reduced work, increased abundance, greater democratic control) are more available than ever before. The problem is that they remain encased within social relations that obscure these potentials and render them impotent. In this context, the demand to reflect upon and repurpose technologies operates to reignite a utopian imagination in the heart of a stale capitalism. An entire array of possibilities already exists. The last chapter examined automation technologies as a key hinge between capitalism and postcapitalism, but repurposing extends much further than just the automation of the productive forces. Similar arguments have been mobilised around logistics networks, around repurposing cities for ecological reasons and around deploying the latest computing technology for postcapitalist ends.<sup>106</sup> Pinpointing these sorts of technologies can help to focus energy on political struggles over their development and use. Logistics provides a particularly significant example, insofar as it simultaneously exploits wage differentials, enables global production and is at the leading edge of automation. Without denying the significance of logistics to the project of exploiting cheap labour across the world, it is possible to see that logistics would be useful to postcapitalism in a variety of ways.<sup>107</sup> Its uses, in other words, go far beyond just capitalist ones. First, any postcapitalist economy will require flexibility in both production (for example, additive manufacturing) and distribution (for example, just-in-time logistics). This enables an economy to be responsive to changes in

individual consumption, unlike the grand and inflexible planning efforts of the Soviet era. Without these technologies, postcapitalism would risk repeating all the economic problems already seen in the first communist experiment.<sup>108</sup> Second, global logistics makes possible the use of a wide array of comparative advantages – not simply wage differentials. To cite one example: research has found that it is more environmentally friendly for certain agricultural goods to be produced in New Zealand and shipped to the UK, as opposed to being produced and consumed in the UK.<sup>109</sup> Even after being shipped across the world, they still have a smaller carbon footprint. The simple reason for this is that reproducing the appropriate climate in the UK would involve intense energy consumption. Such environmental comparative advantages only exist where there is an efficient and global logistics network. Finally, logistics is at the forefront of the automation of work, and therefore represents a prime example of what a postcapitalist world might look like: machines humming along and handling the difficult labour that humans would otherwise be forced to do. It is worth recalling that before the logistics revolution, transporting goods was a physically demolishing task for the bodies of workers. The automation of this labour is something to be applauded, not held back for parochial reasons. For all these reasons, logistics therefore presents an important transition technology between capitalism and postcapitalism.

But there are important limits to repurposing. The Soviets, for example, believed that capitalist technologies and techniques could simply be taken over and turned towards communist ends,<sup>110</sup> but these technologies were biased towards maximal efficiency and rigorous control by management.<sup>111</sup> Given their wholesale adoption of capitalist machinery and management techniques, it was no surprise that the system tended towards capitalist modes of operation. Workers became – once again – mere cogs in the machine, deprived of autonomy and coerced into working harder. The ambitious plan to conquer the capitalist means of production ran aground on the reality that power relationships are embedded within technologies, which cannot therefore be infinitely bent towards purposes that oppose their very functioning.<sup>112</sup> Numerical control technologies, for example, have been used to set the pace of production, forcing workers to keep up with a machine – rendering the power of management more indirect and invisible.<sup>113</sup> In this way, machines can conceal power relations by making them appear as simple mechanical

processes. Yet repurposing remains possible in spite of these limits because there is often a significant untapped 'reservoir of potentials lying dormant within a technology. The difficult point to understand is that, in the words of one historian, 'Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral'.<sup>114</sup> Any given technology is political but flexible, as it always exists in excess of the purposes for which it may have been designed.<sup>115</sup> Rather, the design, meaning and impact of a technology are constantly shifting, altering as users transform it and as its environment changes.<sup>116</sup> Paraphrasing Spinoza, we can say that we know not what a sociotechnical body can do. Who among us fully recognises what untapped potentials await discovery in the technologies that have already been developed? What sorts of postcapitalist communities could be built upon the material we already have? Our wager is that the true transformative potentials of much of our technological and scientific research remain unexplored.

How, then, can we distinguish between technologies that are bound by their limits and technologies whose properties offer potential affordances for a postcapitalist future? There is no a priori way to determine the potentials of a technology, but we can still establish broad parameters to adjudicate on the potentials of a technology, and to apply these in thinking through the specific aspects of individual technologies.<sup>117</sup> In terms of criteria, one approach is to determine what functions constitute necessary and/or exhaustive aspects of a technology. For example, if a technology's only role is that of exploiting workers, or if such a rôle is absolutely necessary to its deployment, then it can have no place in a postcapitalist future. Taylorism, based necessarily on the control and heightened exploitation of workers, would be rejected according to these criteria. Nuclear weapons, requiring the capacity to inflict mass destruction, would likewise have no place in a postcapitalist world.<sup>118</sup> For the most part, however, technologies will be more ambiguous than that. If technology designed to reduce skilled labour permits domination by a managerial class, it also opens up spaces for job-sharing and the reduction of work. If technology that reduces production costs reduces the percentage of people employed, it also reduces the need for people to work. If a technology that centralises decision-making over infrastructures facilitates private control, it also provides a nodal point for collective 'decision-making'. These technologies embody both potentials at the same time, and the task of repurposing is simply one of how to alter the balance between them. One goal of any future-orientated left

could be to outline these broad parameters of adjudication, and to pursue further research and analysis in determining how specific technologies can be repurposed and mobilised towards a postcapitalist project. This is particularly crucial for workers involved in the technology sector who are, through their design choices, building the terrain of future politics.<sup>119</sup> Let us be clear, though: without a simultaneous shift in the hegemonic ideas of society, new technologies will continue to be developed along capitalist lines, and old technologies will remain beholden to capitalist values.

This hegemonic strategy is therefore necessary to any project to transform society and the economy. And in many senses, hegemonic politics is the antithesis to folk politics. It seeks to persuade and influence, rather than presuming spontaneous politicisation; it works on multiple scales, rather than just the tangible and local; it sets out to achieve forms of social power that are long-lasting, rather than temporary; and it operates in domains that are often not superficially ‘political’ at all, rather than focusing on the most spectacular political mediums, such as street protests. A counter-hegemonic strategy would include efforts to transform the common sense of society, revive a utopian social imagination, rethink the possibilities of economics, and eventually repurpose technological and economic infrastructures. None of these steps are sufficient, but they are examples in which concrete action can be taken to build the social and material conditions for a post-work world. They prepare the ground for a moment when transformative change can occur, backed by a mass movement. However, the strategy of counter-hegemony as it has been outlined so far remains abstract. What is needed is some sense of exactly how a counter-hegemonic strategy might gain traction in the real world. Hegemony needs to be constructed, and power needs to be built. We turn next to how such power can be constructed, and who will be building it.



## **Chapter 8**

## **Building Power**

*Constructing a people is the main task of radical politics.*

Ernesto Laclau

A strategy may indicate the broad direction to take, but it still leaves open the question of what forces exist to carry it out. Any strategy requires an active social force, mobilised into a collective formation, acting upon the world. But while putting a counter-hegemonic strategy into practice will require the use of power, the left has been both overwhelmed by and systematically rendered averse to the use of power.<sup>1</sup> The traditional agents of leftist power (the working class and its associated institutional forms) have wilted under attacks from the right and from their own stagnation. Meanwhile, chastened by the failures of previous attempts at social transformation, many have mobilised behind marginal and defensive folk-political actions.<sup>2</sup> Yet building a post-work world will involve large-scale social transformation and require building capacity for the use of power. This chapter argues that, in order to install a new hegemonic order at least three things will be required: a mass populist movement, a healthy ecosystem of organisations and an analysis of points of leverage.<sup>3</sup> The questions of class unity and organisational form are subjects of perennial debate among the left. Class unity is thought to generate networks of solidarity, strength in numbers, confidence and an awareness of common interests. Likewise, organisational strength provides leadership, coordination, stability over time

and the concentration of resources. Leverage points are less often discussed, but no less important. These are points of political or economic power that can be used to compel others to adapt to the interests of a particular group.<sup>4</sup> The classic tactic of the strike, for instance, aims to disrupt production in order to force the owners to accede to workers' demands. Without such leverage points, change can only come about when it is in the interests of the powerful. This chapter examines these three elements for building power and outlines some ways forward. What follows is not intended as an exhaustive or sufficient prescription for what should be done, but offers reflections on the limits of historical precedents, and an argument for the significance of the factors listed above for rebuilding the power of the left. Reconstructing this power is probably the most difficult task facing the left today, yet it is an essential task if a post-work world is to emerge from the devastation wrought by neoliberalism.

## A POPULIST LEFT

Perhaps the most important question for building power is the question of who will be the active agent of a post-work project. What social positions will find a post-work society in their interest? The most obvious answer is one we have already seen: the expanding surplus population. Indeed, as workers in developed countries fall back into precarity, and as more and more of the global population is incorporated as 'free' labourers under capitalism, the basic proletarian condition is coming to characterise a wider swathe of people. We are all, as Marx argued, virtual paupers. At first glance, these trends therefore seem to support a traditional Marxist narrative, whereby the working class was supposed to achieve a dominant position by incorporating ever greater numbers of people and simplifying its economic position.<sup>5</sup> Condensed into increasingly large industrial factories, the working class was forecast to unite in physical terms (sharing space), in terms of its interests (reduced labour, higher wages), and eventually in terms of consciousness (becoming aware of its position as a proletariat): The deskilling of labour would eliminate hierarchies between skilled and unskilled labour, while high demand for labour would mean capital cared little about identity-based divisions (over race, gender, nationality).<sup>6</sup> This did occur in some places and at some times. For instance, while the early twentieth century saw the US black working class violently excluded from white unions; after World War II these racial divisions began to break down in many areas.<sup>7</sup>

Distinctions based on age, sex, skill, nation and income were likewise supposed to fall aside as capitalism progressed.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps most importantly, this emerging working class had strategic importance because of its access to a set of leverage points centred on production. Strikes, factory takeovers, slow-downs and similar tactics were all designed to disrupt the production process and force management and capitalists to acquiesce to working-class demands.<sup>9</sup> This class – paradigmatically comprised of white, male factory workers – was therefore predicted to become large, homogeneous and powerful, making it the vanguard of a post-capitalist revolution. But this did not happen. The working class fragmented, its organisational structures fell apart, and today ‘there is no longer a class fraction that can hegemonise the class’.<sup>10</sup>

Under the combined pressures of deindustrialisation, the globalisation of production, the rise of service economies, the expansion of precarity, the demise of classic Fordist footholds and the proliferation of diverse identities, the industrial working class has become severely fractured. Across the world, the traditional working class is predominantly marginal in terms of its strength (with a few exceptions in countries such as South Africa and Brazil).<sup>11</sup> The Chinese labour movement has some strength, but even here the outsourcing of production to peripheral countries is already working to undermine its power.<sup>12</sup> The power of the global working class is today severely compromised, and a return to past strength seems unlikely. As it stands today, the classical revolutionary subject therefore no longer exists; there is only a diverse array of partly overlapping interests and divergent experiences. However, we might question the idea that the industrial working class was ever in a position to transform the world – today’s situation is not so different from the early years of the labour movement. First, the image of worker unity has always been more of an aspirational vision than an achieved reality. From its origins, the proletariat was riven by divisions – between the waged male worker and the unwaged female labourer, between the ‘free’ worker and the unfree slave, between skilled craftsmen and unskilled labourers, between the core and periphery, and between nation-states.<sup>13</sup> The tendency to unify was always a limited phenomenon, and these differences persist today, exacerbated under conditions of a globalised division of labour. Perhaps more fundamentally, if deindustrialisation (the automation of manufacturing) is a necessary stage along the path towards a postcapitalist society, then the industrial working class could never have been the agent of change. Its existence was predicated upon economic conditions that would have to be eliminated in the

transition to postcapitalism: If deindustrialisation is required for the transition to postcapitalism, then the industrial working class was inevitably going to lose its power in the process – fragmenting and falling apart, just as we have seen in recent decades.

Who, then, can be the transformative subject today? Despite the growing size of the surplus population and common immiseration of the proletariat, we must accept that no answer readily presents itself. The breakdown of lines between employed and unemployed, formal and informal, coincides with the decline in a coherent transformative agent. The fragmentation of traditional groups of resistance and revolt and the generalised decomposition of the working class means that the task today must be to knit together a new collective ‘we’. There is no pre-existing group that would embody universal interests or constitute the necessary vanguard of this transformative project – not the industrial worker, not the intellectual labourer and not the lumpenproletariat. How, then, to compose a people in light of the fragmentation of the proletariat?<sup>14</sup> In practice, there are a variety of ways to organise such a convergence. As we saw, the classic Marxist approach presupposed that the tendencies of capitalism would heighten the division between classes and lead to the unity of the proletariat. Others have argued for a unity on the basis of generic common interests – biological need, for instance – but minimal commonalities tend to lead to minimal demands.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, in the Occupy movements, unity often emerged out of physical proximity – bodies working and living together in camps. Yet such unity often papered over real differences, making it nothing more than a fragile façade. When the physical proximity was destroyed in the dismantling of occupied spaces, unity rapidly collapsed. With the Arab Spring, meanwhile, unity was forged through opposition to shared tyrannical opponents, bringing together a disparate series of groups.<sup>16</sup> However, these recent experiences demonstrate that a unity built solely upon opposition tends to break down when the opponent falls.

The problem for a post-work project is that, despite the underlying commonality of proletarian existence, this provides only a minimal cohesion, which can support a vast range of divergent experiences and interests.<sup>17</sup> The challenge facing a transformative politics is to articulate this series of differences into a common project – without simply asserting that class struggle is the only *real* struggle. Under these conditions, it is no surprise to see that many of the most promising political struggles in recent years have identified

themselves as populist movements rather than class movements.<sup>18</sup> By ‘populism’, we do not mean a sort of mindless mass movement, or a lowest-common-denominator revolt, or a movement with any particular political content.<sup>19</sup> Populism is instead a type of political *logic* by which a collection of different identities are knitted together against a common opponent and in search of a new world.<sup>20</sup> From the anti-globalisation movements, to Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, numerous Latin American movements, and Occupy across the Western world, these movements have mobilised large cross-sections of society rather than just particular class identities.<sup>21</sup>

These populist movements have originated out of the frustration of unmet demands. Under normal democratic circumstances, demands are dealt with separately and within existing institutions – for instance, minimum wage increases, unemployment benefits and healthcare provision. Small changes are granted, but institutional arrangements, including society as a whole, are never questioned. In this fashion, existing hegemonies can be reinforced and threats generally modulated effectively. By contrast, a populist movement begins to emerge when these demands – for fair pay, social housing, childcare, and so on – are increasingly blocked. As the leading thinker on political populism, Ernesto Laclau, explains:

Once we move beyond a certain point, what were requests *within* institutions became claims addressed *to* institutions, and at some stage they became claims *against* the institutional order. When this process has overflowed the institutional apparatuses beyond a certain limit, we start having the people of populism.<sup>22</sup>

Particular interests become increasingly general in this process, and populism emerges, set resolutely against the existing order. The ‘people’, unlike traditional class groupings, are held together by a *nominal* unity even in the absence of any *conceptual* unity. The people is a complex, contested and constructed actor. They name themselves as a coherent group, rather than having any necessary unity of material interests. This helps to explain why, for instance, it was so difficult to pin down the politics of the Occupy movement. The 99 per cent was held together more by a name than by any common politics. This nominal unity is complemented by populism naming the fracture in society and the opposition against which they set themselves.<sup>23</sup> In naming an enemy, it becomes

possible for a wide range of people to see their interests and demands expressed by the movement. *Occupy*, for example, named the 1 per cent, Podemos named ‘the caste’, and Syriza named the Troika. As with the naming of the people, the naming of the antagonism has some attachment to empirical facts, but need not be bound by them. The division that *Occupy* posited between the 1 per cent and the 99 per cent, for instance, is an antagonism that mobilised people despite its lack of empirical accuracy.<sup>24</sup> The naming of the people and their opposition is a political act, not a scientific statement. Both the people and the antagonism in society are therefore constituted through an act of nomination. This represents a response to the impossibility of simply reading off the antagonism of society from brute historical necessity, in an era where class identities have fragmented and differences proliferated.

In order for the ‘people’ of populism to emerge, however, additional elements are necessary. First, one particular demand or struggle must come to stand in for the rest. The *Occupy* movement, for example, mobilised a range of local, regional and national grievances that became knotted together under the struggle against inequality. In such cases, it is not a particular group which seeks recognition from society, but rather a particular group which comes to speak universally for society. In order to do so, however, it must be seen to embody multiple interests. It must stand not only for its own self-interest but come to actually reflect a broad array of interests.<sup>25</sup> For a traditional working-class movement, common interests would be sufficient to secure the allegiance of all. But in a populist movement, the absence of an immediate unity based on material interests means its coherence is perpetually plagued by a tension between the struggle that has come to stand in for the rest and those other struggles. Populism thus involves a continual negotiation of differences and particularisms, seeking to establish a common language and programme in spite of any centrifugal forces. The difference between a populist movement and folk-political approaches lies in this stance towards differences: whereas the former seeks to build a common language and project, the latter prefers differences to express themselves as differences and to avoid any universalising function. The mobilisation of a populist movement around anti-work politics would require articulating a populism in such a way that a variety of struggles for social justice and human emancipation could see their interests being expressed in the movement. Importantly, anti-work politics provides such resources: for example, it is perhaps the best option for a red-green coalition,

insofar as it overcomes the tensions between an economic programme of jobs and growth and an environmental programme of decreased carbon emissions. The post-work project is also an inherently feminist one, recognising the invisible labour carried out predominantly by women, as well as the feminisation of the labour market, and the necessity of providing financial independence for women's full liberation. Equally, it links up with anti-racist struggles, insofar as black and other minority populations are disproportionately affected by high unemployment and the mass incarceration and police brutality associated with jobless communities. Finally, the post-work project builds upon postcolonial and indigenous struggles with the aim of providing a means of subsistence for the massive informal labour force, as well as mobilising against barriers to immigration.<sup>26</sup>

Articulating the character of a movement that can bring together such differences helps to emphasise the importance of demands to any proper populism. Demands form a key medium for building unity, and must therefore connect in multiple ways with different people.<sup>27</sup> Such demands do not presume to know in advance who will be called into action by them, but they allow people to see their own particular interests within them while nevertheless maintaining their differences from each other.<sup>28</sup> For example, the demands of an anti-work politics have different meanings for a university student, a single mother, an industrial worker, and those outside the labour force; but in spite of these differences, each of them can find their own interests represented in the call for a post-work society. Mobilising these people together and under the name of a demand then becomes the work of on-the-ground politics. A movement predicated on a populist logic can therefore give consistency to a series of diffuse grievances and requests, without necessarily negating differences.<sup>29</sup> Particular demands are inscribed into a coherent narrative articulating how various demands share a common antagonist. This is why a vision of the future is essential to a proper populism, and it is what many recent populist movements have lacked. Occupy, for instance, never translated the negative moment of insubordination into a positive political project around which the people could be organised. It never combined diverse interests into a project for a better future, remaining at the negative level of rejection and never providing an 'autonomous focus of subjectivation'.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the end, while the post-work project demands that centrality be given to class, it is not sufficient to mobilise only on the basis of class interests. A broad

spectrum of society needs to be brought together as an active and transformative force. It is to this need that populism responds. Yet the negotiation of commonality at the level of slogans, demands, signs, symbols and identities cannot remain the primary level on which such politics is conducted. A populist movement also needs to act in and through a series of organisations, as well as aiming to achieve the overturning of neoliberal common sense and create a new one in its place. It must seek to build hegemonic forms of power, in all their diverse forms, both inside and outside the state.

## ORGANISATIONAL ECOLOGY

Organisation is a key mediator between discontent and effective action – it transforms a certain quantity of people into a qualitatively different form of power. As the Occupy movement, the anti-war movement and the anti-globalisation movement have made clear, the problem with the left is not necessarily one of raw numbers. On a purely quantitative level, the left is not noticeably ‘weaker’ than the right – in terms of its ability to achieve popular mobilisation, the reverse seems to be true. Particularly in times of crisis, the left seems eminently capable of mobilising a populist movement. The problem lies in the next step: how that force is organised and deployed. For folk politics, organisation has meant a fetishistic attachment to localist and horizontalist approaches that often undermine the construction of an expansive counter-hegemonic project.<sup>31</sup> Yet this organisational fetishism is one of the most detrimental aspects of recent leftist thought: the belief that if only the proper form of organisation is developed, political success will follow.<sup>32</sup> Folk politics is guilty of this, but the same holds for many orthodox positions as well – the range of miracle cures advanced for the decline of the left’s power have included trade unions, vanguards, affinity groups and political parties. In most cases, these organisational forms are advocated without regard for the different strategic terrains they face. Folk politics, for example, takes a particular organisational form built under specific conditions and attempts to transpose it across the entire social and political field. Rather than a decontextualized approach to the problem of organisation, we need to think in terms of a healthy and diverse ecosystem of organisations.

The simple point to make against organisational fetishism is that a political project requires a division of labour. There are a variety of essential tasks to be carried out in a successful political movement: awareness raising, legal

support, media hegemony, power analysis, policy proposals, the consolidation of class memory, and leadership, to name just a few.<sup>33</sup> No single type of organisation is sufficient for performing all of these roles and bringing about large-scale political change. We therefore do not seek to promote any single organisational form as the ideal means of embodying transformational vectors. Every successful movement has been the result, not of a single organisational type, but of a broad ecology of organisations. These have operated, in a more or less coordinated way, to carry out the division of labour necessary for political change. In the process of transformation leaders will arise, but there is no vanguard party – only mobile vanguard functions.<sup>34</sup> An ecology of organisations means a pluralism of forces, able to positively feedback on their comparative strengths.<sup>35</sup> It requires mobilisation under a common vision of an alternative world, rather than loose and pragmatic alliances.<sup>36</sup> And it entails developing an array of broadly compatible organisations:

The point is to create something 'more than mere alliance building (where the parts, understood as constituted groupings of people, are supposed to stay the same, only co-operating punctually) and less than a one-size-fits-all solution (e.g. the idea of the party). This is about strategic interventions that can attract both constituted groups and the 'long tail' that does not belong to any groups, pitched not as exclusive but as complementary, whose effects can reinforce each other.'<sup>37</sup>

This means that the overarching architecture of such an ecology is a relatively decentralised and networked form – but, unlike in the standard horizontalist vision, this ecology should also include hierarchical and closed groups as elements of the broader network.<sup>38</sup> There is ultimately no privileged organisational form. Not all organisations need to aim for participation, openness and horizontality as their regulative ideals. The divisions between spontaneous uprisings and organisational longevity, short-term desires and long-term strategy, have split what should be a broadly consistent project for building a post-work world. Organisational diversity should be combined with broad populist unity.

A quick overview of how such an ecology might operate will offer some sense of how these proposals might work together. This can only be highly schematic, given the particularities of any given struggle and the complexity of the issues at hand. Inevitably, an ecosystem of organisations is forged in specific circumstances,

with different decisions being made in the face of different political contexts. That said, a broad social movement would be essential to any anti-work politics, affording a wide range of different organisational and tactical compositions. At one end of the spectrum, there are transient bursts of political energy, in the form of riots and spontaneous protests. Urban unrest in America, for instance, was a key motivating factor behind elite support for a basic income in the 1960s.<sup>39</sup> Such eruptions may not make intricate demands, but they demand a response. In slightly more organised modes, social movements take on the folk-political approaches seen in recent decades. Operating under principles of direct democracy can be conducive to certain objectives, such as giving people a voice, creating a powerful sense of collective agency and enabling different perspectives to be articulated.<sup>40</sup> It can foster the creation of a populist identity and empower people to start to see themselves as a collective. But what these folk-political organisations lacked was the strategic perspective to transform spectacular scenes of protest and broad populist movements into effective long-term action.<sup>41</sup> It is often the ability of other, more long-term institutionalised organisations to hegemonise around the demands, tactics and strategies of relatively ephemeral movements that determines the ultimate effect of their protests. The most successful occupation movements in recent years have been those that have fostered ties to labour movements (in Egypt, for example) and/or to political parties. In Iceland, for instance, the greatest protest successes were achieved when a red-green coalition was voted in after forcing the conservative administration out;<sup>42</sup> as we write, Spain is showing the potential that arises when social movements engage in a dual strategy both within and outside the party system. If a major social transformation such as the post-work project is to occur, it will come on the back of a mass movement rather than simply decreed from on high. Populist movements on the street will be one of its essential elements.

It has already been hinted at in earlier chapters, but media organisations are an essential part of any emergent political ecology aimed at building a new hegemony. The tasks involved in such a strategy demand a healthy media presence – creating a new common language, giving voice to the people, naming the antagonism, raising expectations, generating narratives that resonate with people and articulating in clear language the grievances we feel. It is these elements that provide the anchors for media narratives to be changed over time. Foundations and journalists are particularly well placed to make efforts at changing media narratives.<sup>43</sup> It was no accident that the Mont Pelerin Society

included numerous journalists among its members. This communication also has to be achieved in a way that resonates with everyday conversation. The jargon of academics is rightly deemed useless by most people. Leftist media organisations should not shy away from being approachable and entertaining, gleaning insights from the success of popular websites. At the same time, the left has typically focused on creating media spaces *outside* the mainstream, rather than trying to co-opt existing institutions and leaking more radical ideas *into* the mainstream. Too often, these news organisations end up simply preaching to the choir, pushing narratives that never escape their own insular echo-chamber. The internet has enabled everyone to have a voice, but it has not enabled everyone to have an audience. Mainstream media sources remain indispensable for this and will continue to do so in the future. Their ability to influence and alter public opinion through framing what is and is not ‘realistic’ remains surprisingly strong. If a counter-hegemonic project is to be successful, it will require an injection of radical ideas into the mainstream, and not just the building of increasingly fragmented audiences outside it. Indeed, one of the key lessons from the US experience with a basic income policy is that the framing of such issues in the media is central to its prospects of success.<sup>44</sup> It is for these reasons that existing media organisations constitute a key battleground in the project set out here.

Alongside the media, intellectual organisations are indispensable components of any political ecology. These extend from bodies like think tanks, to captive university departments and other educational institutions, through to more loosely organised training and consciousness-raising bodies. But building hegemony does not necessarily mean sending down decrees from vanguard intellectual organisations. It is no accident that it is Gramsci, the key thinker of hegemony, who also struck upon the idea of the ‘organic intellectual’ – the intellectual closely linked to and emerging from key material and economic forces within society.<sup>45</sup> Organic intellectuals are participants in practical life, organisers and constructors.<sup>46</sup> A properly functioning leftist intellectual infrastructure would operate to support those institutions identified as broadly in line with their own worldviews by participating in them, spreading their work and, where possible, providing resources. In a world of complexity, no one has a privileged view of the totality, and thus a healthy intellectual sphere will involve intellectuals with multiple perspectives. This will combine with on-the-ground inquiries carried out by workers – examining, for instance, the way in which retail logistics function and the potentials for their disruption,<sup>47</sup>

or the detailed analysis of local power networks as a means to bring about change.<sup>48</sup> In addition to that of organic intellectuals, certain kinds of valuable work can only be carried out in specialist bodies that are able to retain a certain distance from the hurly-burly of everyday politics. As the Mont Pelerin Society understood, some intellectual efforts need to be devoted less to immediate and pressing concerns, and more to the development of long-term proposals. These would include such vital endeavours as the development of new ways of organising and understanding the economy, which requires highly technical knowledge and long-term research. But such work always needs to be fed back into the networks of political actors and social narratives to gain its full effect.

Labour organisations have traditionally been significant forces of social transformation, but today they find themselves on the back foot. At the same time, deeply entrenched habits and inflexible – if not outright corrupt – union leaderships have made the revitalisation of these organisations an uphill battle. Yet they remain indispensable to the transformation of capitalism, and any effort to imagine a new union structure must learn lessons from both the failures of older models and the changing economic conditions facing them today. These include basic things such as enriching the connection between leadership and members, building support across traditional sectoral boundaries (academics supporting cleaners in a university, for example), learning from innovative and often worker-led unions (those around immigrant labourers, for example), radicalising existing unions and building new unions in areas devoid of this organisational lever. In broad terms, the adequacy of a union depends on the alignment of its political form with economic and infrastructural conditions. As we saw in earlier chapters, these conditions are currently defined by the emerging crisis of work. The rise of surplus populations, the return of precarity, the stagnation of wages and the painfully slow recovery of employment all present key challenges for the traditional model of trade unionism. As the work-life distinction breaks down, job security dwindles and rising personal debt lurks in the background, issues around work have effects far beyond the workplace. These shifting social conditions alter the relationship between the union, its members and the wider community. This requires, first of all, a recognition of the social nature of struggle, and the bridging of the gap between the workplace and the community.<sup>49</sup> Problems at work spill over into the home and the community, and vice versa. At the same time, crucial support for union action comes from the community, and unions would be best served by

recognising their indebtedness to the invisible labour of those outside the workplace.<sup>50</sup> These include not only domestic labourers, who reproduce the living conditions of waged workers, but also immigrant workers, precarious workers and the broad array of those in surplus populations who share in the miseries of capitalism. The focus of unions therefore needs to expand beyond supporting only dues-paying members. To be sure, there is a history of worker organisations establishing such connections with the broader community, but today this needs to be made an increasingly explicit goal of union organising. This process can work both ways. For instance, France has seen 'proxy strikes' in which workers declare themselves not to be on strike (and therefore continue to get paid), yet allow people to blockade or occupy their workplace.<sup>51</sup> In addition, workers' movements have always relied upon the local community for moral and logistical support, and if solidarity is built up, communities will come out to defend workers against state repression.<sup>52</sup> Unions can involve themselves in community issues like housing, demonstrating the value of organised labour in the process.<sup>53</sup> Rather than being built solely around workplaces, unions would therefore be more adequate to today's conditions if they organised around regional spaces and communities.<sup>54</sup>

In expanding the spatial focus of union organising, local workplace demands open up into a broader range of social demands. As we argued in Chapter 7, this involves questioning the Fordist infatuation with permanent jobs and social democracy, and the traditional union focus on wages and job preservation. An assessment must be made of the viability of these classic demands in the face of automation, rising precarity and expanding unemployment. We believe many unions will be better served by refocusing towards a post-work society and the liberating aspects of a reduced working week; job sharing and a basic income.<sup>55</sup> The West Coast longshoremen in the United States represent one successful example of allowing automation in exchange for guaranteeing higher wages and less job cuts (though they also occupy a key point of leverage in the capitalist infrastructure).<sup>56</sup> The Chicago Teachers' Union offers another example of a union going far beyond collective bargaining, and instead mobilising a broad social movement around the state of education in general. Moreover, shifting in a post-work direction overcomes some of the key impasses between ecological movements and organised labour. The deployment of productivity increases for more free time, rather than increased jobs and output, can bring these groups together. Changing

the aims of unions and organising community-wide will help to turn unions away from classic – and now failing – social democratic goals, and will be essential to any successful renewal of the labour movement.

Lastly, the state remains a site of struggle, and political parties will have a role in any ecology of organisations – particularly if the traditional social democratic parties continue to collapse and enable a new generation of parties to emerge. Ensuring a post-work society for all will require more than just individual workplaces; it demands success at the level of the state as well.<sup>57</sup> While parties are frequently denounced for their cynical consent to electoralism and the limits posed by international capital, this changes within an ecology of organisations. Rather than making them the impossible vehicle of revolutionary desires – associated with the hopeless prospect of ‘voting in’ postcapitalism – they can instead take on the more realistic task of forming the ‘tip of the iceberg’ in terms of political pressure, as well as developing the ability to bring together a widely varied constituency.<sup>58</sup> The state can complement politics on the street and in the workplace, just as the latter two can broaden the options for parties. The avoidance of the state – common to so many folk-political approaches – is a mistake. Mass movements and parties should be seen as tools of the same populist movement, each capable of achieving different things. At their most general level, parties can integrate various tendencies within a social movement – from reformist to revolutionary – into a common project. While international capital and the inter-state system make radical change virtually impossible from within the state, there are still basic and important policy choices to be made about austerity, housing support, climate change, childcare, demilitarisation of the police and abortion rights. Simply to reject parliamentary politics is to ignore the real advances these policies can make. It takes quite a privileged position to not care about minimum wage regulations, immigration laws, changes to legal support or rulings on abortion. At their best, electoral entities can act as a disruptive force (stalling, publicising controversies, articulating popular outrage), and even act as a progressive force in some situations. This does not imply that social movements should simply be turned into the vote-mobilising wings of political parties. The relationship between parties and social movements should extend far beyond this, into a process of two-way communication. On the one hand, financial support can be given from the party to community initiatives, and various policies – such as laws on public protest – can be amended to facilitate the activities of social movements.

In Venezuela, for instance, the state supported the creation of neighbourhood communes as a way to embed socialism in everyday practices.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, resources for new parties can be mobilised collectively – Podemos, for example, got started through crowd-funding €150,000 – and the vitality of the party can be maintained through constant institutionalised negotiations between local movements, party members and central party structures.<sup>60</sup>

Podemos, for instance, has aimed to build mechanisms for popular governance while also seeking a way into established institutions.<sup>61</sup> It is a multi-pronged approach to social change and offers greater potential for real transformation than either option on its own.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, Brazil's Partido dos Trabalhadores has maintained openness to multiple groups (liberation theology groups, peasant movements) while still organising around an essentially union-based core. In the words of one researcher, 'this combination of grassroots and vanguard constituted a Leninism that was not very Leninist'.<sup>63</sup> What all these experiences show, however, is the mass mobilisation of the people is necessary in order to transform the state into a meaningful tool of their interests, and to overcome the blunt division between the power of movements and the power of the state. The aim must be to avoid both 'the tendency to fetishise the state, official power, and its institutions and the opposing tendency to fetishise antipower'.<sup>64</sup> In a context of widespread discontent with the political system, this remains possible – though, again, the importance of having a discursive framework in place to channel this discontent is obvious. In the end, parties still hold significant political power, and the struggle over their future should certainly not be abandoned to reactionary forces.

It should be clear how far away we now are from the folk-political fetishism of localism, horizontalism and direct democracy. An ecology of organisations does not deny that such organisational forms may have a role, but it rejects the idea that they are sufficient. This is doubly true for a counter-hegemonic project that requires the toppling of neoliberal common sense. What we are calling for, therefore, is a functional complementarity between organisations, rather than the fetishising of specific organisations or organisational forms.

## **POINTS OF LEVERAGE**

If a populist movement successfully built a counter-hegemonic ecosystem of organisations, in order to become effective it would still require the capacity

to disrupt. Even with a healthy organisational ecology and a mass unified movement, change is impossible without opportunities to leverage the movement's power. Historically speaking, many of the most significant advances made by the labour movement were achieved by workers in key strategic locations. Regardless of whether they had widespread solidarity, high levels of class consciousness or an optimal organisational form, they achieved success by being able to insert themselves into and against the flow of capitalist accumulation. In fact, the best predictor of worker militancy and successful class struggle may be the workers' structural position in the economy.

For example, within the early logistics infrastructure, dockworkers found themselves occupying a key point in the circulation of capital. Intermodal transport – the transferring of goods between ships, trains and trucks – was labour-intensive and costly.<sup>65</sup> Lodged in a key passage through which goods had to circulate, the longshoremen who carried out the work controlled a major point of leverage. The result was that dockworkers were incredibly militant and lost more work days to labour disputes than almost any other industry.<sup>66</sup> The famed strength of unions like the United Automobile Workers also arose from their structural position in the production process and the importance of the car industry to the national economy. Their power emerged, moreover, in a time of high unemployment and low levels of organisation – it turned out that neither a supportive labour market nor organisational strength was necessary for success.<sup>67</sup> A similar point of leverage was held by coalminers. Working in mines lent itself to greater autonomy from management in an environment where work stoppages were particularly potent. The consequence was that 'their position and concentration gave them opportunities, at certain moments, to forge a new kind of political power'.<sup>68</sup> The same holds for mining today, which is resistant to the threat of capital flight, since the resource supply is itself immobile. The mining areas of South Africa present a contemporary example, revealing both the potency of the unions and the violence of capital. When miners went on a wildcat strike in 2012, the state was called in and over thirty workers were killed in the Marikana massacre. Less violent, but no less significant, is the monopoly position of certain suppliers. Strikes at these points, such as in the Pou Chen Group in China, pose a real threat to capitalist interests by blocking off an entire supply chain.<sup>69</sup> At the other end of that chain, retail distribution is also primed for significant militant action, providing rich opportunities for the

disruption of contemporary capitalism's reliance on just-in-time logistics.<sup>70</sup> The significance of such points of leverage can hardly be overestimated.

But the past century has seen the conscious and unconscious winnowing away of these points of leverage. The development of shipping containers enabled the automation of intermodal transport;<sup>71</sup> the globalisation of logistics facilitated capital's ability to move factories in response to strikes; and the shift to oil as the primary energy source drastically reduced the number of choke-points available for political action. Today, the classic points of leverage have largely disappeared, necessitating a new round of experimentation and strategic reflection. Experimentation is necessary precisely because politics is a set of dynamic systems, driven by conflict, and by adaptations and counter-adaptations, leading to tactical arms races. This means that any one type of political action is highly likely to become ineffective over time, as its opponents learn and adapt. Thus, no given mode of political action is historically inviolable. Indeed, over time, there has been an increasing need to discard familiar tactics as the forces they are marshalled against learn to defend against and counter-attack them more effectively. Secrecy is met by undercover infiltrators; the use of masks is met by new legislation against it; kettling is met by apps that track police movements; the recording of police violence is met by its criminalisation; mass protest is met by heavy regulation that renders it boring and sterile; non-violent civil disobedience is met by violent police brutality. Political tactics are a dynamic field of forces, and experimentation is essential in working around new state and corporate impediments to change.

The history of the labour movement provides an exemplary picture of such an approach. One of its primary tactics has been to limit the supply of labour, thereby making it more powerful and valuable.<sup>72</sup> Early efforts towards this end often operated by withholding the training for particular jobs by discriminating on the basis of skills, gender and race.<sup>73</sup> Early typesetters, for example, organised to protect a male-centred skilled workforce against the threatened introduction of relatively unskilled female labourers.<sup>74</sup> However, deskilling by capital and the industrialisation of production made it possible to undermine many of the skilled labour unions and opened up the labour supply to a much wider extent. The result was the breakdown of many traditional craft unions that were based around particular skill sets, with the emergence instead of industrial unions organising both skilled and unskilled workers along industry lines.<sup>75</sup> Another possible tactic for reducing the labour supply is one that we examined earlier:

moving towards the reduction of working hours. This produces a reduction of the labour supply, as was achieved by the exclusionary unions above, but with an important difference. Rather than relying on excluding particular groups from skilled trades, the tactic of reducing working hours relies on withdrawing a portion of everyone's labour time.<sup>76</sup> For various reasons, though – not least because of the postwar consensus between capital and labour – this tactic fell out of favour, and the labour movement's attention instead turned towards collective bargaining over pay. As we argued earlier, however, this tactic has the potential to be revived in the effort to transform our socioeconomic system. Another key tactic has been strikes, whose logic is to inflict costs on capital and force its hand in negotiations. But this approach was limited by the fact that unskilled labour could be easily replaced with new (and more docile) scab workers. Strikes also allow employers to use the downtime to bring in new machinery – precisely the changes which workers may be struggling against. As a response, a new tactic of sit-down strikes and factory occupations emerged in the early twentieth century – making it impossible for replacement workers to operate and threatening to demonstrate that management was superfluous.<sup>77</sup> What we see here is a dynamic arms race occurring between opponents as each seeks to leverage new tactics and technologies for its own purposes.

Today, the terrain of these struggles is again changing, indicated by at least two broad and emerging problems with classic workplace disruption. In the first place, there is the tendency towards automation. Just as the automation of logistics took away some of the leverage points occupied by dockworkers, so too does the automation of factories, transportation, and eventually service work portend a significant decline in the potential for workplace struggles. The emergence of self-driving vehicles, for instance, will rapidly diminish the points of leverage contained within transportation systems. The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers in the UK will have to face this problem directly in the near future, with self-driving trains already in operation and further expansion planned. The mayor of London, Boris Johnson, has explicitly stated that automation should be used to destroy one of the few remaining militant British unions.<sup>78</sup> Crucially, however, leverage points remain, and new ones will emerge in the wake of restructuring and automation. For instance, as one author pointed out – in 1957! – 'a strike by a very small number of workers is liable to hold up an entire automated factory'.<sup>79</sup> A decline in the number of workers overseeing a process also means a concentration of potential power

within a smaller group of individuals. Likewise, while an automated transport system may not be subject to driver strikes, it may be open to strikes by programmers and IT technicians, as well as being more susceptible to blockades, because of the technical limitations of self-driving cars. These vehicles function by reducing environmental variation, making them 'more akin to a train running on invisible tracks'.<sup>80</sup> The intentional manipulation of the environment is therefore likely to be particularly disruptive. Equally, the use of pattern recognition algorithms in various tasks (e.g., diagnostics, emotion- and face-detection, surveillance) is highly susceptible to disruption.<sup>81</sup> A technical understanding of machines like these is essential to understanding how to interrupt them, and any future left must be as technically fluent as it is politically fluent: In the end, what is required is an analysis of the automation trends that are restructuring production and circulation, and a strategic understanding of where new points of leverage might develop.

The second related limitation of classic disruptive tactics is that they might falter in the face of mass unemployment and struggles organised around surplus populations rather than the working class. If there is no workplace to disrupt, what can be done? Again, the repertoires of contention were transformed in response to changing social, political, technological and economic conditions. As precarity, zero-hour contracts, temporary work and internships spread throughout society, movements of the unemployed and movements based around social reproduction offer important and instructive examples of resistance. These struggles have never had a workplace to disrupt, so they have always had to invent new means of leveraging power. It is one of the myopias of many on the left to only see workers' power coming from disrupting production, when in fact contesting the existing order has taken numerous forms outside the workplace. In Argentina, for instance, unemployed workers' movements blockaded major streets in order to make themselves heard and were central to the overthrow of the government.<sup>82</sup> Expelled from the wage, shorn of a workplace, blockading urban arteries becomes a primary means of exerting political power.<sup>83</sup> The surge in freeway blockades in the wake of the August 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, demonstrates the increasing prevalence of this type of struggle.<sup>84</sup> Similar tactics take on other aspects of capitalist reproduction with the same basic objective, including rent strikes and debt strikes. Port blockades also have potential as a tactic, and computer modelling can offer insights into

how to avoid scattershot and ineffective political action.<sup>85</sup> These new tactics must, of course, be situated within a larger strategic plan, or risk becoming so many temporary movements that erupt only to disappear without a trace.

The classic basis of power for the labour movement, then, has been diffused and weakened. Yet this need not herald the death-knell of class struggle. Automation and precarity may spell the decline of interruptions at points of production, but they do not mean the end of disruption in total. Just as traditional points of leverage have been effaced in the context of a flexible, global infrastructure, this shift has also increased the vulnerability of that infrastructure in other ways. Well-positioned local struggles can immediately become global.<sup>86</sup> The task before us must be to have a sober reckoning with changed material realities and to strategise over new spaces for action. There are precedents and lessons to be learned in existing practices like the ‘power structure analysis’ undertaken by unions and community organisers, which maps local social networks and key actors, determining their weaknesses, strengths, allies and enemies.<sup>87</sup> The argument we are making here is for the construction of a complement to this process, emphasising the material conditions of struggle rather than just its social networks. In either approach, though, on-the-ground knowledge must be linked up with more abstract knowledge of changing economic conditions.

A post-work world will not emerge out of the benevolence of capitalists, the inevitable tendencies of the economy or the necessity of crisis. As this and the previous chapter have argued, the power of the left – broadly construed – needs to be rebuilt before a post-work society can become a meaningful strategic option. This will involve a broad counter-hegemonic project that seeks to overturn neoliberal common sense and to rearticulate new understandings of ‘modernisation’, ‘work’ and ‘freedom’. This will necessarily be a populist project that mobilises a broad swathe of society and that, while being anchored in class interests, nevertheless remains irreducible to them. It will involve a full-spectrum approach to organisations that seeks to use different organisational advantages in combination – not according to a pragmatism of loose alliances, but under the aegis of a vision for a better world. And these organisations and masses will have to identify and secure new points of leverage in the circuits of capitalism, with its increasingly barren workplaces. In the face of a globalised capitalism that is always on the move, opposition to it must pre-empt the transformations of tomorrow in a supple politics of anticipation.

## Conclusion

*You live the surprise results of old plans.*

Jenny Holzer

Where, then, do we stand? The latest cycle of struggles has been exhausted, undone by their tendencies towards folk politics, and everywhere today mass outrage combines with mass impotence. We have argued that the most promising way forward lies in reclaiming modernity and attacking the neoliberal common sense that conditions everything from the most esoteric policy discussions to the most vivid emotional states. This counter-hegemonic project can only be achieved by imagining better worlds – and in moving beyond defensive struggles. We have outlined one possible project, in the form of a post-work politics that frees us to create our own lives and communities. Triumph in the political battles to achieve it will require organising a broadly populist left, building the organisational ecosystem necessary for a full-spectrum politics on multiple fronts, and leveraging key points of power wherever possible.

Yet the end of work would not be the end of history. Building a platform for a post-work society would be an immense accomplishment, but it would still only be a beginning.<sup>1</sup> This is why conceiving of left politics as a politics of modernity is so crucial: because it requires that we not confuse a post-work society – or indeed any society – with the end of history. Universalism always

undoes itself, possessing its own resources for an immanent critique that insists and expands upon its ideals. No particular social formation is sufficient to satisfy its conceptual and political demands. Equally, synthetic freedom compels us to reject contentment with the existing horizon of possibilities. To be satisfied with post-work would risk leaving intact the racial, gendered, colonial and ecological divisions that continue to structure our world.<sup>2</sup> While such asymmetries of power would hopefully be unsettled by a post-work world, the efforts to eliminate them would undoubtedly need to continue. Further, we would still be seeking a systemic replacement for markets and facing the task of building new political institutions. We would still not know what a sociotechnical body can do, and we would still have to unfetter technological development and unleash new freedoms. Transcending our reliance on waged labour is important, but we would still be faced with the immense tasks of undoing other political, economic, social, physical and biological constraints. A project towards a post-work world is necessary but insufficient.

Yet a post-work platform does provide us with a new equilibrium to aim at, completing the shift from social democracy to neoliberalism to a new post-work hegemony. We believe it focuses the tasks of the present and provides a stable point from which to seek out further emancipatory gains. As with any platform, those who create it cannot fully predict how it will be used. While certain constraints and opportunities are built into a platform, they do not exhaustively determine the ways of life it will enable. A platform leaves the future open, rather than presuming to close it.<sup>3</sup> When it is designed correctly, it succeeds precisely by allowing people to build further developments on top of it. With a post-work platform, people may begin to participate more in political processes, or perhaps they will retreat into individualised worlds formed by media spectacles. But there are reasons for hope, given the shift in work ethic required for a post-work society. Such a project demands a subjective transformation in the process – it potentiates the conditions for a broader transformation from the selfish individuals formed by capitalism to communal and creative forms of social expression liberated by the end of work. Humanity has for too long been shaped by capitalist impulses, and a post-work world portends a future in which these constraints have been significantly loosened. This does not mean that a post-work society would simply be a realm of play. Rather, in such a society, the labour that remains will no

longer be imposed upon us by an external force – by an employer or by the imperatives of survival. Work will become driven by our own desires, instead of by demands from outside.<sup>4</sup> Against the austerity of conservative forces, and the austere life promised by anti-modernists, the demand for a post-work world revels in the liberation of desire, abundance and freedom.

Such a future is undoubtedly risky, but so is any project to build a better world. There are no guarantees that things will work out as expected: a post-work world may generate immanent dynamics towards the rapid dissolution of capitalism, or the forces of reaction may co-opt the liberated desires under a new system of control. Concerns about the risks of political action have led parts of the contemporary left into a situation where they desire novelty, but a novelty without risk. Generic demands to experiment, create and prefigure are commonplace, but concrete proposals are all too often met with a wave of criticism outlining every possible point at which things might go wrong. In light of this dual tendency – for novelty, but against the risks inherent in social transformation – the allure of political ideas celebrating spontaneous ‘events’ becomes clearer. The event (as revolutionary rupture) becomes an expression of the desire for novelty without responsibility. The messianic event promises to shatter our stagnant world and bring us to a new stage of history, conveniently voided of the difficult work that *is* politics. The hard task ahead is to build new worlds while acknowledging that they will create novel problems. The best utopias are always riven by discord.

This imperative runs in opposition to the kind of precautionary principle that seeks to eliminate the contingency and risk involved in making decisions. On strong readings, the precautionary principle aims to convert epistemic uncertainty into a guardianship of the status quo, gently turning away those who would seek to build a better future with the imperative to ‘do more research’. We might also consider here that the precautionary principle contains an almost inherent lacuna: it ignores the risks of its own application. In seeking to err always on the side of caution, and hence of eliminating risk, it contains a blindness to the dangers of inaction and omission.<sup>5</sup> While risks need to be reasonably hedged, a fuller appreciation of the travails of contingency implies that we are usually not better off taking the precautionary path. The ‘precautionary principle is designed to close off the future and eliminate contingency, when in fact the contingency of high-risk adventures is precisely what leads to a more open future – in the words of conceptual artist Jenny

Holzer, 'You live the surprise results of old plans.' Building the future means accepting the risk of unintended consequences and imperfect solutions. We may always be trapped, but at least we can escape into better traps.<sup>6</sup>

## AFTER CAPITALISM

The post-work project and, more broadly, the project of postcapitalism are progressive determinations of the commitment to universal emancipation. In practice, these projects involve 'a controlled dissolution of market forces . . . and a delinking of work from income'.<sup>7</sup> But the ultimate trajectory of universal emancipation is towards overcoming physical, biological, political and economic constraints. This ambition to undo constraints is one that, taken to its limits, leads inexorably towards grand and speculative frontiers. For the early Russian cosmists, even death and gravity were obstacles to be overcome through future ingenuity.<sup>8</sup> In these post-planetary speculations, we see the project of human emancipation transformed into an unceasing one that winds its way along two highly intertwined paths of development: technological and human.

Technological development follows a recombinant path, bringing together existing ideas, technologies and technological components into new combinations. Simple objects are united into increasingly complex technological systems, and each newly developed piece of technology forms the basis for a further technology. With this expansion, the combinatorial possibilities rapidly proliferate.<sup>9</sup> It would appear that capitalist competition has been a significant driver of this technological advancement. Under a popular narrative, inter-capitalist competition is seen as driving technological changes in the production process, while consumer capitalism demands an increasingly differentiated set of products. But at the same time, capitalism has placed substantial obstacles in the way of technological development. While the carefully curated image of capitalism is one of dynamic risk-taking and technological innovation, this image in fact obscures the real sources of dynamism in the economy. Developments like railways, the internet, computing, supersonic flight, space travel, satellites, pharmaceuticals, voice-recognition software, nanotechnology, touch-screens and clean energy have all been nurtured and guided by states, not corporations. During the golden postwar era of research and development, two-thirds of research and development was publicly

funded.<sup>10</sup> Yet recent decades have seen corporate investment in high-risk technologies drastically decline.<sup>11</sup> And with neoliberalism's cutback in state expenditure, it is therefore unsurprising that technological change has diminished since the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> In other words, it has been collective investment, not private investment, that has been the primary driver of technological development.<sup>13</sup> High-risk inventions and new technologies are too risky for private capitalists to invest in; figures such as Steve Jobs and Elon Musk slyly obscure their parasitical reliance on state-led developments.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, multi-billion-dollar megascale projects are ultimately driven by non-economic goals that exceed any cost–benefit analysis. Projects of this scale and ambition are in fact hindered by market-based constraints, since a sober analysis of their viability in capitalist terms reveals them to be profoundly underwhelming.<sup>15</sup> In addition, some social benefits (those offered by an Ebola vaccine, for example) are left unexplored because they have little profit potential, while in some areas (such as solar power and electric cars) capitalists can be seen actively impeding progress, lobbying governments to end green-energy subsidies and implementing laws that obstruct further development. The entire pharmaceuticals industry provides a particularly devastating illustration of the effects of intellectual property monopolisation, while the technology industry is increasingly plagued by patent trolling. Capitalism therefore misattributes the sources of technological development, places creativity in a straitjacket of capitalist accumulation, constrains the social imagination within the parameters of cost–benefit analyses and attacks profit-destroying innovations. To unleash technological advancement, we must move beyond capitalism and liberate creativity from its current strictures.<sup>16</sup> This would begin to liberate technologies away from their current purview of control and exploitation, and towards the quantitative and qualitative expansion of synthetic freedom. It would enable the utopian ambitions of megaprojects to be unleashed, invoking the classic dreams of invention and discovery. The dreams of space flight, the decarbonisation of the economy, the automation of mundane labour, the extension of human life, and so on, are all major technological projects that find themselves hampered in various ways by capitalism. The bootstrapping expansionary process of technology, once liberated from capitalist fetters, can potentiate both positive and negative freedoms. It can form the basis for a fully postcapitalist economy, enabling a shift away from scarcity, work and exploitation, and towards the full development of humanity.<sup>17</sup>

Intertwined with this picture of liberated technological transformation is therefore the future of human beings. The pathway towards a postcapitalist society requires a shift away from the proletarianisation of humanity and towards a transformed and newly mutable subject. This subject cannot be determined in advance; it can only be elaborated in the unfolding of practical and conceptual ramifications. There is no ‘true’ essence to humanity that could be discovered beyond our enmeshments in technological, natural and social webs.<sup>18</sup> The idea that a post-work society would simply inculcate further mindless consumption neglects humanity’s capacity for novelty and creativity, and invokes a pessimism based upon current capitalist subjectivity.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the development of new needs must be distinguished from their commodification. Whereas the latter locks new desires into a profit-seeking framework that constrains human flourishing, the former denotes a real form of progress. The ‘extension and differentiation of needs as a whole’ is to be lauded over any folk-political dream of returning to a ‘primitive natural state of these needs’. The complexification of needs is disfigured under capitalist consumer society, to be sure, but, unbound from this mutation, ‘their aim is necessarily the development of a “rich individuality” for the whole of mankind’.<sup>20</sup>

The postcapitalist subject would therefore not reveal an authentic self that had been obscured by capitalist social relations, but would instead unveil the space to create new modes of being. As Marx noted, ‘all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature’, and the future of humanity cannot be determined abstractly in advance: it is first of all a practical matter, to be carried out in time. Nevertheless, some general notions might be entertained. For Marx, the primary principle of postcapitalism was the ‘development of human powers which is an end in itself’.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the fundamental aim of his project was universal emancipation. The various ideas that Marxists have advanced to get there – the socialisation of production, ending the value-form, eliminating wage labour – are simply means towards achieving this end. The immediate question is: What does this aim entail? The synthetic construction of freedom is the means by which human powers are to be developed. This freedom finds many different modes of expression, including economic and political ones,<sup>22</sup> experiments with sexuality and reproductive structures,<sup>23</sup> and the creation of new desires, expanded aesthetic capabilities,<sup>24</sup> new forms of thought and reasoning, and ultimately entirely new

modes of being human.<sup>25</sup> The expansion of desires, of needs, of lifestyles, of communities, of ways of being, of capacities – all are invoked by the project of universal emancipation. This is a project of opening up the future, of undertaking a labour that elaborates what it might mean to be human, of producing a utopian project for new desires, and of aligning a political project with the trajectory of an endless universalising vector. Capitalism, for all its appearances of liberation and universality, has ultimately restrained these forces in an endless cycle of accumulation, ossifying the real potentials of humanity and constricting technological development to a series of banal marginal innovations. We move faster – capitalism demands it; yet we go nowhere. Instead, we must build a world in which we can accelerate out of our stasis.

## BEFORE THE FUTURE

The argument of this book has been that the left can neither remain in the present nor return to the past. To construct a new and better future, we must begin taking the necessary steps to build a new kind of hegemony. This runs counter to much of our political common sense today. The tendencies towards folk politics – emphasising the local and the authentic, the temporary and the spontaneous, the autonomous and the particular – are explicable as reactions against a recent history of defeats, of partial, ambivalent victories, and of surging global complexity. But they remain radically insufficient for achieving broader victories against a planetary capitalism. Rather than seeking temporary and local relief in the various bunkers of folk politics, we must today move beyond these limits. Against ideas of resistance, withdrawal, exit or purity, the task of the left today is to engage the politics of scale and expansion, along with all the risks such a project entails. Doing so requires us to salvage the legacy of modernity and reappraise which parts of the post-Enlightenment matrix can be saved and which must be discarded; for it is only a new form of universal action that will be capable of supplanting neoliberal capitalism.

Without tabulae rasae or miraculous events, it is within the tendencies and affordances of our world today that we must locate the resources from which to build a new hegemony. While this book has focused on full automation and the end of work, there is a broad palette of political options

for a contemporary left to choose from. This would mean, most immediately, rethinking classic leftist demands in light of the most advanced technologies. It would mean building upon the post-nation-state territory of ‘the stack’ – that global infrastructure that enables our digital world today.<sup>26</sup> A new type of production is already visible at the leading edges of contemporary technology. Additive manufacturing and the automation of work portend the possibility of production based on flexibility, decentralisation and post-scarcity for some goods. The rapid automation of logistics presents the utopian possibility of a globally interconnected system in which parts and goods can be shipped rapidly and efficiently without human labour. Cryptocurrencies and their block-chain technology could bring forth a new money of the commons, divorced from capitalist forms.<sup>27</sup>

The democratic guidance of the economy is also accelerated by emerging technologies. Famously, Oscar Wilde once said that the problem with socialism was that it took up too many evenings. Increasing economic democracy could require us to devote an overwhelming amount of time to discussions and decisions over the minutiae of everyday life.<sup>28</sup> The use of computing technology is essential in avoiding this problem, both by simplifying the decisions to be made and by automating decisions collectively deemed to be irrelevant. For example, rather than deliberating over every aspect of the economy, decisions could instead be made about certain key parameters (energy input, carbon output, level of inequality, level of research investment, and so on).<sup>29</sup> Social media – divorced from its drive to monetisation and tendency towards narcissism – could also foster economic democracy by bringing about a new public. New modes of deliberation and participation might emerge from a postcapitalist social media platform. And the perennial problem facing postcapitalist economies – that of how to distribute goods efficiently in the absence of market prices – can also be overcome through computers. Between the early Soviet attempts at economic planning and today, computing power has grown exponentially, to become 100 billion times more powerful.<sup>30</sup> The calculation of how to distribute our main productive resources is increasingly viable. Equally, data collection on resources and preferences through ubiquitous computing means that the raw data for running an economy are more readily available than ever before. And all of this could be mobilised towards the implementation of the Lucas Plan on national and global scales – redirecting our economies towards the

## CONCLUSION 183

self-conscious production of socially useful goods like renewable energy, cheap medicine and the expansion of our synthetic freedoms.

This is what a twenty-first-century left looks like. Any movement that wishes to remain relevant and politically potent must grapple with such potentials and developments in our technological world. We must expand our collective imagination beyond what capitalism allows. Rather than settling for marginal improvements in battery life and computer power, the left should mobilise dreams of decarbonising the economy, space travel, robot economies – all the traditional touchstones of science fiction – in order to prepare for a day beyond capitalism. Neoliberalism, as secure as it may seem today, contains no guarantee of future survival. Like every social system we have ever known, it will not last forever. Our task now is to invent what happens next.