

Gramsci and Us*

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This is not a comprehensive exposition of the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, nor a systematic account of the political situation in Britain today. It is an attempt to 'think aloud' about some of the perplexing dilemmas facing the Left, in the light of - from the perspective of - Gramsci's work. I do not claim that, in any simple way, Gramsci 'has the answers' or 'holds the key' to our present troubles. I do believe that we must 'think' our problems in a Gramscian way - which is different. We mustn't *use* Gramsci (as we have for so long abused Marx) like an Old Testament prophet who, at the correct moment, will offer us the consoling and appropriate quotation. We can't pluck up this 'Sardinian' from his specific and unique political formation, beam him down at the end of the 20th century, and ask him to solve our problems for us: especially since the whole thrust of his thinking was to refuse this easy transfer of generalisations from one conjuncture, nation or epoch to another.

The thing about Gramsci that really transformed my own way of thinking about politics is the question which arises from his *Prison Notebooks*. If you look at the classic texts of Marx and Lenin, you are led to expect a revolutionary epochal historical development emerging from the end of the First World War onwards. And indeed events did give considerable evidence that such a development was occurring. Gramsci belongs to this 'proletarian moment'. It occurred in Turin in the 1920s, and other places where people like Gramsci, in touch with the advance guard of the industrial working class — then at the very forefront of modern production — thought that, if only the managers and politicians would get out of the way, this class of proletarians could run the world, take over the factories, seize the whole machinery of society, materially transform it and manage it, economically, socially, culturally, technically. The truth about the 1920s is that the 'proletarian moment' very nearly came off. Just before and after the First World War, it really was touch and go as to whether, under the leadership of such a class, the world might not have been transformed - as Russia was in 1917 by the Soviet revolution. This was the moment of the proletarian perspective on history. What I have called Gramsci's question' in the *Notebooks* emerges in the aftermath of that moment, with the recognition that history was not going to go that way, especially in the advanced industrial capitalist societies of Western Europe. Gramsci had to confront the turning back, the failure, of that moment: the fact that such a moment, having passed, would never return in its old form. Gramsci, here, came face to face with the revolutionary character of history itself. When a conjuncture unrolls, there is no 'going back'. History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment. You have to attend, 'violently', with all the 'pessimism of the intellect' at your command, to the 'discipline of the conjuncture'.

In addition (and this is one of the main reasons why his thought is so pertinent to us today) he had to face the capacity of the Right - specifically, of European fascism - to hegemonise that defeat.

So here was a historic reversal of the revolutionary project, a new historical conjuncture, and a moment which the Right, rather than the Left, was able to dominate. This looks like a moment of total crisis for the Left, when all the reference points, the predictions, have been shot to bits. The political universe, as you have come to inhabit it, collapses.

I don't want to say that the Left in Britain is in exactly the same moment; but I do hope you recognise certain strikingly similar features, because it is the similarity between those two situations, that makes the question of the *Prison Notebooks* so seminal in helping us to understand what our condition is today. Gramsci gives us, not the tools with which to solve the puzzle, but the means with which to ask the right kinds of questions about the politics of the 1980s and 1990s. He does so by directing our attention unswervingly to what is *specific* and *different* about this moment. He always insists on this attention to difference. It's a lesson which the Left in Britain has yet to learn. We do tend to think that the Right is not only

always with us, but is always exactly the same: the same people, with the same interests, thinking the same thoughts. We are living through the transformation of British Conservatism — its partial adaptation to the modern world, via the neo-liberal and monetarist 'revolutions'. Thatcherism has reconstructed Conservatism and the Conservative Party. The hard-faced, utilitarian, petty-bourgeois businessmen are now in charge, not the grouse-shooting, hunting and fishing classes. And yet, though those transformations are changing the political terrain of struggle before our very eyes, we think the differences don't have any *real* effect on anything. It still feels more 'left-wing' to say the old ruling-class politics goes on in the same old way.

Gramsci, on the other hand, knew that difference and specificity mattered. So, instead of asking 'what would Gramsci say about Thatcherism?' we should simply attend to this riveting of Gramsci to the notion of difference, to the specificity of a historical conjuncture: how different forces come together, conjuncturally, to create the new terrain, on which a different politics must form up. That is the intuition that Gramsci offers us about the nature of political life, from which we can take a lead.

I want to say what I think 'the lessons of Gramsci' are, in relation, first of all, to Thatcherism and the project of the New Right; and, second, in terms of the crisis of the Left. Here, I'm foregrounding only the sharp edge of what I understand by Thatcherism. I'm trying to address the opening, from the mid-1970s onwards, of a new political project on the Right. By a project, I don't mean (as Gramsci warned) a conspiracy. I mean the construction of a new agenda in British politics. Mrs Thatcher always aimed, not for a short electoral reversal, but for a long historical occupancy of power. That occupancy of power was not simply about commanding the apparatuses of the state. Indeed, the project was organised, in the early stages, in opposition to the state, which in the Thatcherite view had been deeply corrupted by the welfare state and by Keynesianism and had thus helped to 'corrupt' the British people. Thatcherism came into existence in contestation with the old Keynesian welfare state, with social democratic 'statism', which, in its view, had dominated the 1960s. Thatcherism's project was to transform the state in order to restructure *society*: to decentre, to displace, the whole post-war formation; to reverse the political culture which had formed the basis of the political settlement — the historic compromise between labour and capital — which had been in place from 1945 onwards.

The depth of the reversal aimed for was profound: a reversal of the ground-rules of that settlement, of the social alliances which underpinned it and the values which made it popular. I don't mean the attitudes and values of the people who write books. I mean the ideas of the people who simply, in ordinary everyday life, have to calculate how to survive, how to look after those who are closest to them.

That is what is meant by saying that Thatcherism aimed for a reversal in ordinary common sense. The 'common sense' of the English people had been constructed around the notion that the last war had erected a barrier between the bad old days of the 1930s and now: the welfare state had come to stay; we'd never go back to using the criterion of the market as a measure of people's needs, the needs of society. There would always have to be some additional, incremental, institutional force — the state, representing the general interest of society — to bring to bear against, to modify, the market. I'm perfectly well aware that socialism was not inaugurated in 1945. I'm talking about the taken-for-granted, popular base of welfare social democracy, which formed the real, concrete ground on which any socialism worth the name has to be built. Thatcherism was a project to engage, to contest, *that* project, and, wherever possible, to dismantle it, and to put something *new* in place. It entered the political field in an historic contest, not just for power, but for popular authority, for hegemony.

It is a project — this confuses the Left no end — which is, simultaneously, regressive and progressive. Regressive because, in certain crucial respects, it takes us backwards. You couldn't be going anywhere else but backwards to hold up before the British people, at the end of the 20th century, the idea that the best the future holds is for them to become, for a second time, 'Eminent Victorians'. It's deeply regressive, ancient and archaic. .

But don't misunderstand it. It's also a project of 'modernisation'. It is a form of *regressive modernisation*. Because, at the same time, Thatcherism had its beady eye fixed on one of the

most profound historical facts about the British social formation: that it never ever properly entered the era of modern bourgeois civilisation. It never made that transfer to modernity. It never institutionalised, in a proper sense, the civilisation and structures of advanced capitalism — what Gramsci called 'Fordism'. It never transformed its old industrial and political structures. It never became a second capitalist-industrial-revolution power, in the way that the US did, and, by another route, (the 'Prussian route'), Germany and Japan did. Britain never undertook that deep transformation which, at the end of the 19th century, *remade* both capitalism *and* the working classes. Consequently, Mrs Thatcher knows that there is no serious political project in Britain today which is not also about constructing a politics and an image of what *modernity* would be like for our people. And Thatcherism, in its regressive way, drawing on the past, looking backwards to former glories rather than forwards to a new epoch, has inaugurated the project of reactionary modernisation.

There is nothing more crucial, in this respect, than Gramsci's recognition that every crisis is also a moment of reconstruction; that there is no destruction which is not, also, reconstruction; that, historically nothing is dismantled without also attempting to put something new in its place; that every form of power not only excludes but produces something.

That is an entirely new conception of crisis and of power. When the Left talks about crisis, all we see is capitalism disintegrating, and us marching in and taking over. We don't understand that the disruption of the normal functioning of the old economic, social, cultural order, provides the opportunity to reorganise it in new ways, to restructure and refashion, to modernise and move ahead. If necessary, of course, at the cost of allowing vast numbers of people — in the North East, the North West, in Wales and Scotland, in the mining communities and the devastated industrial heartlands, in the inner cities and elsewhere — to be consigned to the historical dustbin. That is the 'law' of capitalist modernisation: uneven development, organised disorganisation.

Face to face with this dangerous new political formation, the temptation is always, ideologically, to dismantle it, to force it to stand still, by asking *the* classic Marxist question: who does it really represent? Now, usually when the Left asks that old classic Marxist question in the old way, we are not really asking a question, we are making a statement. We already know the answer. *Of course*, the Right represents the occupancy, by capital, of the state, which is nothing but its instrument. Bourgeois writers produce bourgeois novels. The Conservative Party is the ruling class at prayer. Etc, etc ... This is Marxism as a theory of the obvious. The question delivers no new knowledge, only the answer we already knew. It's a kind of game, political theory as a Trivial Pursuit. In fact, the reason we need to ask the question is because *we really don't know*.

It really is puzzling to say, in any simple way, whom Thatcherism represents. Here is the perplexing phenomenon of a petty-bourgeois ideology which 'represents', and is helping to reconstruct, both national and international capital. In the course of 'representing' corporate capital, however, it wins the consent of very substantial sections of the subordinate and dominated classes. What is the nature of this ideology which can inscribe such a vast range of different positions and interests in it, and which seems to represent a little bit of everybody — including most of the readers of this essay! For, make no mistake, a tiny bit of all of us is also somewhere inside the Thatcherite project. Of course, we're all one hundred per cent committed. But every now and then — Saturday mornings, perhaps, just before the demonstration — we go to Sainsbury's and we're just a tiny bit of a Thatcherite subject.

How do we make sense of an ideology which is not coherent, which speaks now, in one ear, with the voice of free-wheeling, utilitarian, market-man, and in the other ear, with the voice of respectable, bourgeois, patriarchal man? How do these two repertoires operate together? We are all perplexed by the *contradictory* nature of Thatcherism. In our intellectual way, we think that the world will collapse as the result of a logical contradiction: this is the illusion of the intellectual - that ideology must be coherent, every bit of it fitting together, like a philosophical investigation. When, in fact, the whole purpose of what Gramsci called an organic (i.e. historically effective) ideology is that it articulates into a configuration different subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations. It does not reflect, it *constructs* a 'unity' out of difference.

We've been in the grasp of the Thatcherite project, not since 1983 or 1979, as official doctrine has it, but since 1975. 1975 is the climacteric in British politics. First of all, the oil hike. Secondly, the onset of the capitalist crisis. Thirdly, the transformation of modern Conservatism by the accession of the Thatcherite leadership. That is the moment of reversal when, as Gramsci argued, national and international factors came together. It doesn't begin with Mrs Thatcher's electoral victory, as politics is not a matter of elections alone. It lands in 1975, right in the middle of Mr Callaghan's political solar plexus. It breaks Mr Callaghan — already a broken reed — in two. One half remains avuncular, paternalist, socially-conservative. The other half dances to a new tune. One of the siren voices, singing the new song in his ear, is his son-in-law, Peter Jay, one of the architects of monetarism, in his missionary role as economic editor at *The Times*. He first saw the new market forces, the new sovereign consumer, coming over the hill like the marines. And, hearkening to these intimations of the future, the old man opens his mouth; and what does he say? The kissing has to stop. The game is over. Social democracy is finished. The welfare state is gone forever. We can't afford it. We've been paying ourselves too much, giving ourselves a lot of phoney jobs, having too much of a swinging time.

You can just see the English psyche collapsing under the weight of the illicit pleasures it has been enjoying — the permissiveness, the consumption, the goodies. It's all false; tinsel and froth. The Arabs have blown it all away. And now we have got to advance in a different way. Mrs Thatcher speaks to this 'new course'. She speaks to something else, deep in the English psyche: its masochism. The need which the English seem to have to be ticked off by Nanny and sent to bed without a pudding. The calculus by which every good summer has to be paid for by twenty bad winters. The Dunkirk Spirit — the worse off we are, the better we behave. She didn't promise us the give-away society. She said, iron times; back to the wall; stiff upper lip; get moving; get to work; dig in. Stick by the old, tried verities, the wisdom of 'Old England'. The family has kept society together; live by it. Send the women back to the hearth. Get the men out on to the Northwest Frontier. Hard times — followed, much later, by a return to the Good Old Days. She asked you for a long leash — not one, but two and three terms. By the end, she said, I will be able to redefine the nation in such a way that you will all, once again, for the first time, since the Empire started to go down the tube, feel what it is like to be part of Great Britain Unlimited. You will be able, once again, to send our boys 'over there', to fly the flag, to welcome back the fleet. Britain will be Great again. People don't vote for Thatcherism, in my view, because they believe the small print. People in their right minds do not think that Britain is now a wonderfully booming, successful economy. But Thatcherism, as an ideology, addresses the fears, the anxieties, the lost identities, of a people. It invites us to think about politics in images. It is addressed to our collective fantasies, to Britain as an imagined community, to the social imaginary. Mrs Thatcher has totally dominated that idiom, while the Left forlornly tries to drag the conversation round to 'our policies'.

This is a momentous historical project, the regressive modernisation of Britain. To win over ordinary people to that, not because they're dupes, or stupid, or because they are blinded by false consciousness. Since, in fact, the political character of our ideas cannot be guaranteed by our class position or by the 'mode of production', it is possible for the Right to construct a politics which does speak to people's experience, which does insert itself into what Gramsci called the necessarily fragmentary contradictory nature of common sense, which does resonate with some of their ordinary aspirations, and which, in certain circumstances, can recoup them as subordinate subjects, into a historical project which hegemonises what we used — erroneously — to think of as their necessary class interests. Gramsci is one of the first modern Marxists to recognise that interests are not given but have to be politically and ideologically constructed.

Gramsci warns us in the *Notebooks* that a crisis is not an immediate event but a process: it can last for a long time, and can be very differently resolved: by restoration, by reconstruction or by passive transformism. Sometimes more stable, sometimes more unstable; but in a profound sense, British institutions, the British economy, British society and culture have been in a deep social crisis for most of the 20th century.

Gramsci warns us that organic crises of this order erupt, not only in the political domain and the traditional areas of industrial and economic life, not simply in the class struggle, in the old sense; but in a wide series of polemics, debates about fundamental sexual, moral and intellectual questions, in a crisis in the relations of political representation and the parties — on a whole range of issues which do not necessarily, in the first instance, appear to be articulated with politics, in the narrow sense, at all. That is what Gramsci calls the crisis of authority, which is nothing but the crisis of hegemony or general crisis of the state.

We are exactly in that moment. We have been shaping up to such a 'crisis of authority' in English social life and culture since the mid 1960s. In the 1960s, the crisis of English society was signalled in a number of debates and struggles around new points of antagonism, which appeared at first to be far removed from the traditional heartland of British politics. The Left often waited patiently for the old rhythms of the class struggle to be resumed, when in fact it was the forms of 'the class struggle' itself which were being transformed. We can only understand this diversification of social struggles in the light of Gramsci's insistence that, in modern societies, hegemony must be constructed, contested and won on many different sites, as the structures of the modern state and society complexify and the points of social antagonism proliferate.

So one of the most important things that Gramsci has done for us is to give us a *profoundly expanded conception* of what politics itself is like, and thus also of power and authority. We cannot, after Gramsci, go back to the notion of mistaking electoral politics, or party politics in a narrow sense, or even the occupancy of state power, as constituting the ground of modern politics itself. Gramsci understands that politics is a much expanded field; that, especially in societies of our kind, the sites on which power is constituted will be enormously varied. We are living through the proliferation of the sites of power and antagonism in modern society. The transition to this new phase is decisive for Gramsci. It puts directly on the political agenda the questions of moral and intellectual leadership, the educative and formative role of the state, the 'trenches and fortifications' of civil society, the crucial issue of the consent of the masses and the creation of a new type or level of civilisation, a new culture. It draws the decisive line between the formula of 'Permanent Revolution' and the formula of 'civil hegemony'. It is the cutting-edge between the war of movement and the war of position": the point where Gramsci's world meets ours.

That does not mean, as some people read Gramsci, that therefore the state doesn't matter any more. The state is clearly absolutely central in articulating the different areas of contestation, the different points of antagonism, into a regime of rule. The moment when you can get sufficient power in the state to organise a central political project is decisive, for then you can use the state to plan, urge, incite, solicit and punish, to *conform* the different sites of power and consent into a single regime. That is the moment of 'authoritarian populism' — Thatcherism simultaneously 'above' (in the state) and 'below' (out there with the people).

Even then, Mrs Thatcher does not make the mistake of thinking that the capitalist state has a single and unified political character. She is perfectly well aware that, though the capitalist state is articulated to securing the long-term, historical conditions for capital accumulation and profitability, though it is the guardian of a certain kind of bourgeois, patriarchal civilisation and culture, it is, and continues to be, an arena of contestation.

Does this mean that Thatcherism is, after all, simply the 'expression' of the ruling class? Of course Gramsci always gives a central place to the questions of class, class alliances, class struggle. Where Gramsci departs from classical versions of Marxism is that he does not think that politics is an arena which simply *reflects* already unified collective political identities, already constituted forms of struggle. Politics for him is not a dependent sphere. It is where forces and relations, in the economy, in society, in culture, have to be actively *worked* on to produce particular forms of power, forms of domination. This is the production of politics — politics as a production. This conception of politics is fundamentally contingent, fundamentally open-ended. There is no law of history which can predict what must inevitably be the outcome of a political struggle. Politics depends on the relations of forces at any particular moment. Revolution' and the formula of 'civil hegemony'. It is the cutting-edge between the war of movement and the war of position": the point where Gramsci's world meets ours.

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The 'good sense' of the people exists, but it is just the beginning, not the end, of politics. It doesn't *guarantee* anything. Actually, he said, 'new conceptions have an extremely unstable position among the popular masses'. There is no unitary subject of history. The subject is necessarily divided, an ensemble: one half Stone Age, the other containing 'principles of advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history, intuitions of a future philosophy. Both of those things struggle inside the heads and hearts of the people to find a way of articulating themselves politically. Of course, it is possible to recruit them to very different political projects.

Especially today, we live in an era when the old political identities are collapsing. We cannot imagine socialism coming about any longer through the image of that single, singular subject we used to call Socialist Man. Socialist Man, with one mind, one set of interests, one project, is dead. And good riddance. Who needs 'him' now, with his investment in a particular historical period, with 'his' particular sense of masculinity, shoring 'his' identity up in a particular set of familial relations, a particular kind of sexual identity? Who needs 'him' as the singular identity through which the great diversity of human beings and ethnic cultures in our world *must* enter the 21st century? This 'he' is dead: finished. Gramsci looked at a world which was complexifying in front of his eyes. He saw the pluralisation of modern cultural identities, emerging between the lines of uneven historical development, and asked the question: what are the political forms through which a new cultural order could be constructed, out of this 'multiplicity of dispersed wills, these heterogeneous aims'. Given that that is what people are really like, given that there is no law that will make socialism come true, can we find forms of organisation, forms of identity, forms of allegiance, social conceptions, which can both connect with popular life and, in the same moment, transform and renovate it? Socialism will not be delivered to us through the trapdoor of history by some *deus ex machina*.

Gramsci always insisted that hegemony is *not* exclusively an ideological phenomenon. There can be no hegemony without the decisive nucleus of the economic. On the other hand, do not fall into the trap of the old mechanical economism and believe that, if you can only get hold of the economy, you can move the rest of life. The nature of power in the modern world is that it is *also* constructed in relation to political, moral, intellectual, cultural, ideological, sexual questions. The question of hegemony is always the question of a new cultural order. The question which faced Gramsci in relation to Italy faces us now in relation to Britain:

what is the nature of this new civilisation? Hegemony is not a state of grace which is installed forever. It's not a formation which incorporates everybody. The notion of a 'historical bloc' is *precisely different* from that of a pacified, homogeneous, ruling class.

It entails a quite different conception of how social forces and movements, in their diversity, can be articulated into a set of strategic alliances. To construct a new cultural order, you need not to reflect an already-formed collective will, but to fashion a new one, to inaugurate a new historic project.

I've been talking about Gramsci in the light of, in the aftermath of, Thatcherism: using Gramsci to comprehend the nature and depth of the challenge to the Left which Thatcherism and the new Right represent in English life and politics. But I have, at the same moment, inevitably also been talking about the Left. Or rather, I've *not* been talking about the Left, because the Left, in its organised, labourist form, does not seem to have the slightest conception of what putting together a new historical project entails. It does not understand the necessarily contradictory nature of human subjects, of social identities. It does not understand politics as a production. It does not see that it is possible to connect with the ordinary feelings and experience which people have in their everyday lives, and yet to articulate them progressively to a more advanced, modern form of social consciousness. It is not actively looking for and working upon the enormous diversity of social forces in our society. It doesn't see that it is in the very nature of modern capitalist civilisation to proliferate the centres of power, and thus to draw more and more areas of life into social antagonism. It does not recognise that the identities which people carry in their heads - their subjectivities, their cultural life, their sexual life, their family life, their ethnic identities, their health - have become massively *politicised*.

I simply don't think, for example, that the current Labour leadership understands that its political fate depends on whether or not it can construct a politics, in the next 20 years, which is able to address itself, not to one, but to a diversity of different points of antagonism in society; unifying them, in their differences, within a common project. I don't think they have grasped that Labour's capacity to grow as a political force depends absolutely on its capacity to draw from the popular energies of very different movements; movements *outside* the party which it did not — could not — set in play, and which it cannot therefore administer. It retains an entirely bureaucratic conception of politics. If the word doesn't proceed out of the mouths of the Labour leadership, there must be something subversive about it. If politics energises people to develop new demands, that is a sure sign that the natives are getting restless. You must expel or depose a few. You must get back to that fiction, the 'traditional Labour voter: to that pacified, Fabian notion of politics, where the masses hijack the experts into power, and then the experts do something for the masses: later ... much later. The hydraulic conception of politics.

That bureaucratic conception of politics has nothing to do with the mobilisation of a variety of popular forces. It doesn't have any conception of how people become empowered by doing something: first of all about their immediate troubles; then, the power expands their political capacities and ambitions, so that they begin to think again about what it might be like to rule the world ... Their politics has ceased to have a connection with this most modern of all resolutions — the deepening of democratic life.

Without the deepening of popular participation in national-cultural life, ordinary people don't have any experience of actually running anything. We need to re-acquire the notion that politics is about expanding popular capacities, the capacities of ordinary people. And in order to do so, socialism itself has to speak to the people whom it wants to empower, in words that belong to them as late 20th century ordinary folks.

You'll have noticed that I'm not talking about whether the Labour Party has got its policy on this or that issue right. I'm talking about a whole conception of politics: the capacity to grasp in our political imagination the huge historical choices in front of the British people, today. I'm talking about new conceptions of the nation itself: whether you believe Britain can advance into the next century with a conception of what it is like to be 'English' which has been entirely constituted out of Britain's long, disastrous imperialist march across the earth. If you really think that, you haven't grasped the profound cultural

transformation required to *remake* the English. That kind of cultural transformation is precisely what socialism is about today.

Now a political party of the Left, however much it is centred on government, on winning elections, has, in my view, exactly this kind of decision before it. The reason why I'm not optimistic about the 'mass party of the working class' ever understanding the nature of the historical choice confronting it is precisely because I suspect Labour does secretly still believe that there's a little bit of lee-way left in the old, economic-corporate, incremental, Keynesian game. It does think it could go back to a little smidgeon of Keynesianism here, a little bit more of the welfare state there, a little bit of the old Fabian thing ... Actually, though I don't have a cataclysmic vision of the future, I honestly believe that that option is now closed. It's exhausted. Nobody-believes in it any more. Its material conditions have disappeared. The ordinary British people won't vote for it because they know in their bones life is not like that any more. What Thatcherism, in its radical way, poses is not what we can get back to but along which route are we to go forward? In front of us is the historic choice: capitulate to the Thatcherite future, or find another way of imagining.

Don't worry about Mrs Thatcher herself; she will retire to Dulwich. But there are lots more third, fourth and fifth generation Thatcherites, dry as dust, sound to a man, waiting to take her place. They are convinced that socialism is about to be obliterated forever. They think we are dinosaurs. They think we belong to another era. As socialism slowly declines, a new era will dawn and these new kinds of possessive men will be in charge of it. They dream about real cultural power. And Labour, in its softly-softly, don't-rock-the-boat, hoping-the-election-polls-will-go-up way, actually has in front of it only the choice between becoming historically irrelevant or beginning to sketch out an entirely new form of civilisation.

I don't say socialism, lest the word is so familiar to you that you think I mean just putting the same old programme we all know about back on the rails. I am talking about a renewal of the whole socialist project in the context of modern social and cultural life. I mean shifting the relations of forces — not so that Utopia comes the day after the next general election, but so that the *tendencies* begin to run another way. Who needs a socialist Heaven where everybody agrees with everybody else, where everybody's exactly the same? God forbid. I mean a place where we can begin the historic quarrel about what a new kind of civilisation must be. Is it possible that the immense new material, cultural and technological capacities, which far outstrip Marx's wildest dreams, which are now actually in our hands, are going to be politically hegemonised for the reactionary modernisation of Thatcherism? Or can we seize on those means of history-making, of making new human subjects, and shove it in the direction of a new culture? That's the choice before the Left.

'One should stress', Gramsci wrote, 'the significance which, in the modern world, political parties have in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world, because essentially what they do is to work out the ethics and the politics corresponding to these conceptions and act as it were as their historical "laboratory".'

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