

A LEFT WIDE OPEN: Alliances and Socialist Strategy

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A classic moment of alliance politics: the NSW BLF, 1973-75.

The following article is intended to provoke discussion around aspects of a trend of thought in left politics which, while hardly new in a general sense, has taken new directions and gained new emphases in recent years — which I will call, for shorthand purposes, 'the alliance strategy'. Briefly expressed, the alliance strategy takes as its central reference-point an image of the political canvas

where the radical and progressive forces are linked by a system of tacit and explicit alliances developed through the processes of day-to-day political activity, and also in the cross-fertilisation of political programs and political theory. At the same time, it proposes a concept of alliance which is far broader and more complex than simple programmatic compromises or political deals: one which

pictures processes of dialogue and communication (and, at times, even of struggle)¹ as forging links between social and political forces and movements, their political and day-to-day cultures, and their theoretical traditions. It is, in a sense, a generalisation of what we have learnt about the nature of political alliances onto the complex terrain of society as a whole.

While this is basically a *practical* strategy, in the sense that it seems to have emerged over time as a fact against the grain of several of our traditional theoretical assumptions, it is one which has considerable consequences for our theory as well — even though valuable precedents for it can be found in the theoretical writings of Antonio Gramsci and in the political writings of other figures such as Togliatti. It is also an experience which suggests some lessons for how we conceive of the formation and development of our theory itself. Eric Aarons put it polemically, but well, when he asked:

But if we give up the view that marxism does, or should, or will (if re-interpreted yet again) provide us with a unitary theory, a total explanation, a formula for prediction — will that not stop us from 'getting it all together in our heads' and leave us all at sea?

Not if we reject that expectation, and use our theoretical resources to help us 'listen' more to practice instead of thinking that theory can somehow dictate to reality how it must behave.²

Nevertheless, this still leaves open the thorny question of how and from where we obtain our 'theoretical resources' in the first instance. If this is not at the present time a critical puzzle, this is very largely because we still have so much theoretical catching-up to do.

Now, on the question of the *desirability* of coalitions or alliances among the left and progressive forces on the plane of political practice, not many of us, on what could reasonably be called the renewable left, are in much doubt. Obviously, the left is in a bad way (and this goes for the whole left, not merely the organised left) and without some forms of alliances and coalitions with like-minded people and movements, the left is not only not going to get very far, it may, in fact, in the foreseeable future, cease to exist in any organised manner at all. But what is in doubt, and what is in desperate need of a bit of 'theory' in the sense of the word outlined above, is how we should conceive of such alliances operating, what should be the ground-rules and even, in a sense, the morality under which they should be constituted, and what, in the first instance, they should set out to achieve.

There are two distinct problems here. The first relates to how alliances operate between what might be called the traditional left — and in particular the trade union movement — and parts of the left outside it; the second to how alliances should be constructed in a more general sense. The first of these relates largely to ways of looking at alliances which are fundamentally hostile to many aspects of socialist renewal altogether. The second relates to attitudes among members of the organised left who are broadly sympathetic to the alliance strategy but who, by dint of their political education, force of habit and so on, tend to conceive of the strategy in a reductive, hierarchical, or even downright authoritarian manner.

The argument against the alliance strategy, in the sense in which it is defined above, can take either of at least two forms. The first (and more traditional) approach is to assert what is called the 'leading role of the working class' (meaning, in fact, the trade union movement), in any alliance or coalition between left and progressive forces. Now, it bears saying that simply to *assert* the 'leading role' of anything in this manner is quite meaningless: meaningless not because the working class is 'finished' as a class (whatever that might mean) but because, literally, it has no practical reference to reality. 'The working class' (i.e. the organised working class) simply acts in any concrete political conjuncture as an element of a coalition of forces — social, institutional, even cultural — defined by the political balance of forces in society as a whole. Obviously, as an organised grouping with an enormous amount of muscle, the trade union movement has to be an important part of any realistic strategy for change. But no power on earth can give it some sort of centrifugal force in alliances negotiated on the terrain of political activity as we daily experience it. 'Leading roles' are not bestowed from the heavens — they are earned.

The second argument against the alliance strategy as defined above is a good deal more difficult to come to grips with. Its key phrase — as canonised in the title of a booklet produced by the hard-line wing of the British CP — is 'class politics', though it is far from clear exactly what that means. A familiar feature of the 'class politics' school of thought is its propensity to define itself not as a positive approach to understanding political reality, but rather by means of a primarily negative critique of the alliance strategy. Thus, the authors of the *Class Politics* pamphlet describe the theoretical basis of what they describe as the 'newer left' as 'the idea that ... issues such as peace, sexism, racism and law and order are not *class issues* and cannot be fought out as *class issues*' (my emphasis — DB), entailing a strategy based upon 'substituting the politics of new "movements" and "forces" for class politics' and 'denying that they can be adequately located there', and leading to

an incipient liberal pluralism in which the 'new forces' and indeed the labour movement itself become so many discrete interest groups which can only be held together at any one time by a populist electoral programme based on the lowest common denominator of political acceptability.³

And indeed an obsession with 'pluralism', as the perceived 'dissolving agent' of an ordered hierarchy of political forces such as is allegedly represented by the term 'class politics', is one of the hallmarks of the class politics approach.

Yet, viewed in another light, the class politics approach appears not so much as a nostalgic view of socialist political strategy, as a theoretical construct serving rather different practical ends. On one level, 'class analysis' serves as a hammer for beating over the head certain trends in the women's movement in recent years which are frankly sceptical of the supposed 'marxist-feminist' synthesis as a basis for socialist feminist practice. On another, it serves as a kind of moral prioritisation of the concerns of the traditional left, by the rather oblique device that class politics is seen to be effected by bringing the priorities of all

major participants in alliances to the altar of an already defined class analysis. And, of course, both these elements are related: it is precisely the 'betrayal' of 'unity' within the working class (defined as above) that contemporary trends in socialist feminism have engendered, *via* their critique of the structures as well as the practice of the labor movement, which constitutes the defining case of refusal to succumb to the arbiter of class analysis.

In a theoretical sense, this class politics vogue, which is itself deeply implicated in what Stuart Hall has aptly described as the 'fundamentalist marxist revival' is both a self-protective response to the bewildering new forms of the left's crisis, and a defensive response to the theoretical gulf which looms between older styles of politics and the politics of newer forces and movements. But, in a practical sense, it simply serves to carry on the old vanguardist approaches by new means: class politics, like the leading role of the working class, is a fount of true consciousness not itself amenable to transformation or redirection in the unfolding of the alliance process.

The reductionist view of coalition politics runs deep through the accumulated processes of thought and habit of *all* of us

The second problem arises among supporters of the alliance strategy who tend to reduce it to a mechanical and hierarchical process which reproduces many of the least attractive features of the existing organised left — and which are at least a part of the reason for its waning influence and appeal. This kind of approach can take any of a number of forms — appeals for coalitions based substantially along existing organisational lines, which become (or tend to become) mere coalitions of convenience for the sake of individual issues which are left essentially unrelated to other issues; notions of new parties or organisations which substantively reproduce existing structures or patterns of work, without any conception of the different needs or philosophies of groups at present outside such structures; and conceptions of alliances or coalitions based upon interpretations of programmatic unity which tend to reduce the idea of common programs to the lowest-common denominator approach. This last tendency is especially galling when it is precisely the operation of *contradictions* which socialists schooled in the marxist tradition have always felt to be the driving force of practical and theoretical advance.

Undoubtedly, it would be easy enough to find broad agreement between, say, the trade union movement and much of the women's movement, for the proposition that 'working class living standards have to be defended and improved'. It is much less easy, however, to forge instant unity around the question of how, in an economy where (whatever the method of ownership of the means of production) the total wage bill is subject to definite constraints, redistribution *within* the working class ought to be effected, so that the preferential status of men's work can be countered. In the words of Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell,

If women are to share domestic labour equally with men, then men will have to increase their time spent on unpaid work. If women are to increase the level of their earnings to the point where they match men's, then men's earnings will inevitably decline in relation to women's. If women are to occupy skilled, higher-paid jobs in equal numbers with men, then there are bound to be fewer of these jobs available to men.⁴

It is difficult to see how what I will term the reductionist view of alliance politics can cope with this sort of challenge. Where the class politics and leading role approaches try to bluff through such contradictions by saying (for instance) that industrial militancy is capable of solving all wage questions, the reductionist view of alliance politics simply remains silent.

But it is impossible to understand the nature of the obstacle posed by the reductionist view of coalition politics unless it is recognised how deeply it runs through the accumulated processes of thought and habit of *all* of us. As was noted in the last issue of *ALR*, there was more than a hint of the reductionist view in the structure of the Broad Left Conference. (Although there, at least, there was the opportunity for breaking through these fetters.) A more dramatic example perhaps was the recent proposal for the new labour movement weekly *7 Days*, which clearly stated that its primary role as a labour movement organ was to be (as it were) 'rounded out' by selective representation of the mass social movements — without, of course, giving the representatives the ability to upset the apple cart. In the final analysis, the reductionist view of coalition politics (even in its most sophisticated forms) tends to defuse the impact and the implications of the roles, aims and philosophies of the constituent elements in alliances — for instance, by reducing them to the status of minority, or single issue, groups which are then felt to be somehow 'all part of the same mass'. Yet it is precisely upon the terrain of the autonomy and the difference of the constituent elements that genuine, fruitful alliances are negotiated and maintained.

For many years, alliances were treated basically as expediences outside the normal ground rules of politics

Historically speaking, it has been the reductionist view of coalition politics which has dominated the left's conception of the role of alliances and alliance strategies. For many years, alliances were treated basically as expediences *outside* the normal ground rules of politics: where the out-and-out vanguardist approach had, of necessity to be temporarily tucked away in a cupboard, as it were — as in the Popular Fronts era.⁵ Historically, it is as close to a strategy of alliances in its own right as we have been able to get.

It is no coincidence, then, that the first serious attempts at formulating the kind of alliance strategy discussed here (and the kind of organisational forms capable of co-existing with it) came from outside the political culture of the traditional left — which is to say, of course, from within the experience of the 'new' women's movement of the 1970s.

Here the oft-cited classical text is Hilary Wainwright's introduction to *Beyond the Fragments* (1979), although perhaps a more developed conception of the same basic approach is again provided by Beatrix Campbell:

Alliances are not simply about arithmetic — aggregating groups of people, regarded as minorities, adding them up so that they become a majority. That view of alliances reduces politics to electoral arithmetic. Alliances are political processes which transform the constituent parts in their encounter with each other. They are political dialogues in which the constituent parts become both collective agents for change and also the subjects of change.⁶

This is an important concept, and one fraught with implications for the rest of our theory. And yet the theoretical tools we have inherited from the marxist tradition are almost silent on the nature of this kind of



Beatrix Campbell.

encounter. I would agree with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their remarkable recent work on *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that a prime reason for this is the allpersuasive 'essentialism' which has underlain many marxist conceptions of the political process — although, as will be noted shortly, I have some reservations about other aspects of Laclau and Mouffe's approach.⁷

By essentialism I mean, very broadly, the belief that the political process is given structure by an essence or essences which have a kind of universal quality independent of the existence of the structure itself. 'Motive forces', determinations in the last or any other instance, 'objective' class interests and so on are all concepts which have played this sort of role in marxist theory from time to time, quite independently of the conceptual status of other elements in the analysis. And, of course, today the catch-all essentialist device is the class politics approach, with its never-ending search for an essential 'class' *belonging* for problems, issues and movements; to give them a kind of fixity which could put them (as it were) comfortably 'in the frame' of our inherited assumptions about politics.

While Laclau and Mouffe draw their particular formulation of the function of essentialism from the French theorist Jacques Derrida and his critique of the structuralist trend in academic thought,⁸ it is equally applicable to less rarefied approaches to social theory. The value of this general approach is that it 'frees up' our theory for a more realistic understanding of the political processes we can see going on around us every day. Like some of the more fruitful trends in contemporary social theory, it demonstrates 'a desire to think in terms sensitive to difference (of others without opposition, of heterogeneity without hierarchy)',⁹ thereby demonstrating also an ability to see concepts in terms of the irrevocably heterogeneous nature of the forces for progressive change in societies like ours and, indeed, the increasing cultural and social plurality of the societies themselves. In the words of Renato Nicoloni, until recently Rome's Communist Councillor for Culture, 'In cultural habits and customs today there no longer exists the possibility of organic interpretations of society or values. On the contrary, there is a confused, contradictory, uneven plurality of wills, cultural expressions, values ... and we must consider it a positive phenomenon'.¹⁰

The problem with Laclau and Mouffe's approach to the question, though, is that once they've dismantled the framework of some of our more stubborn misconceptions of politics and hegemony, they remain very vague about how to understand *concretely* the kind of terrain they've opened up. In an earlier contribution they described the hegemonic strategy a little grandly, as consisting of 'a vast system of alliances that are continuously redefined and renegotiated'¹¹ — a phrase suggestive of perhaps a little too much intellectual enthusiasm and too little concrete analysis. In short, they seem less interested in their discoveries than in the process of *discovering* itself. So it is probably worth while mentioning briefly here — by way of an ending, if not a conclusion — a few of the consequences which flow on from placing an alliance strategy, shorn of its essentialist features, at the centre of our analysis.

One of the most tenacious beliefs of many marxists — against all the dictates of our political experience — is that,



The Greater London Council's Ken Livingstone and pop band UB40.

by pointing out that people who identify themselves by means of particular movements, issues, lifestyles, subcultures, and so on which seem to escape the net of the traditional concerns of our analysis, are part of the 'broader working class', this somehow explains their senses of identity in class terms. The practical correlate of this, of course, is the fond belief that if only 'marginal' or 'backward' elements of the population could come to see themselves as workers, first and foremost, somehow this would unlock for them a ready-made critique of patriarchal, capitalist society

Realistic class politics today lies in understanding the experiences by which people identify themselves in relation to the larger society

— which they would thereupon seek to overturn. Now, it bears mentioning that there are good historical precedents for such a situation — the experience both in Australia and Western Europe between c.1850 and the 1920s is an obvious one — and in hardly any of these cases did they lead to anything resembling a revolutionary situation. But that is, in any case, largely beside the point. The real point is that realistic class politics today lies in understanding the various interlocking, but different, cultural and social experiences by which people whom we might classify as part of the popular masses identify *themselves* as standing in a certain relation to that larger imagined entity known as society. Knitting together the self-perceptions of people's relations

to society is itself a form of alliance-building on the ideological plane which helps make sense of what we mean by 'working class'.

On one level this requires 'a means of grasping not the singular meaning (a revolt against capitalism!) of people's self-identification in the culture of their daily lives, 'but the pluralism of the play of styles, codes and languages which can now be seen to constitute the realm of the popular'.¹² On another, it requires an understanding of the 'underlying drift of cultural change', and of the dynamics which have produced 'a more loosely-textured, more diffuse and diverse daily experience'¹³ across the entire span of the social forces to which we attach the name of the working class. Put simply, it means that we have to seek alliances *within* the working class across lines of connection which have little or nothing to do with politics with a capital P. This not only means broadening-out our understanding of alliances: it also means broadening-out our conceptions of what alliances can be negotiated *around*. Here, an exemplary instance of the possibilities of this new conception of alliance politics is Britain's late lamented Greater London Council, which forged alliances with the voluntary sector, with community groups, with grassroots popular music and its supporters and other supposedly apolitical social forces through its innovative grants policy.

Probably the most profound and far-reaching consequence of an alliance strategy 'freed-up' from essentialism, though, lies in that cluster of ideas to which we commonly give the name 'hegemony'. Indeed, part of the problem of this important concept, as is now coming to be

realised, is that in a sense it tries to explain *too much*.¹⁴ Hegemony has been used, at various different times or even at the same time, to explain the ability of a 'leading force' in society to hold together a ruling bloc comprised of sometimes quite disparate social forces; to the ideological, political and cultural mechanisms by which such cohesion is secured; to the political-cultural commonsense by which the aims of the hegemonic bloc are generalised to secure the support of the broader masses; and also less directly to the coercive or juridical mechanisms which may or may not be essential to the process, depending upon the nature of the society.

By bringing our understanding of alliances and essentialism to our thinking about hegemony, however, we can quickly discover several things about the idea itself. One is that any realistic account of hegemony has to understand that the various elements which go to making up a hegemonic consensus or way of looking at the world are drawn from the whole range of experiences within people's social existence, and not merely from the agenda of politics with -a-capital-P. This is simply the extension of the insights which alliance politics provided into the politics of 'class'. And, by the same token, the ideas underpinning such a hegemonic consensus are always far wider and more sophisticated than the tunnel vision which usually goes by the name of political ideology.

In an earlier incarnation, Laclau and Mouffe used to argue that hegemony was the articulation of a central 'hegemonic principle' with other ideas and values (what they called 'popular-democratic' as opposed to 'class' ideologies). But, of course, this is in itself a kind of essentialism, in that it assumes again that the essential element — in this case the hegemonic principle — stands outside of or prior to the other, contingent, elements. It is a much more adequate expression of the insights of the alliance strategy simply to view the so-called hegemonic principle as itself a contingent,

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historical tradition — a tradition which socialists have inherited from earlier generations of socialists, which has often been transformed, and which will continue to be transformed, in its encounters with other radical or liberatory sets of values and beliefs.

Nor is a hegemonic commonsense or way of looking at the world simply a matter of connecting up different views of politics, seen as representing the perspectives of different social forces or movements, into some sort of seamless whole. Rather, a hegemonic commonsense is one which is able to come to terms with the irreducible *differentness* of perspectives within a much broader perspective which assumes certain shared general values about society, democracy, gender, the environment and so on. This is neither a good thing nor a bad thing: it is simply an observable fact about the nature of beliefs and values within a society like ours today, as well as within the left itself. The idea of a unified socialist commonsense, like that of a

totalising theory, is one which runs against the grain of all the insights of alliance politics.

Finally there is a whole complex of unanswered questions around the general problem of the perceptible gap (we could almost call it a quantum leap) between the alliance strategy as we know it in our experience, and a further stage in the strategy which would eventually push society in a socialist direction. Put slightly differently, this is the problem of how to move from the actually-existing forces for social change we have been able to detect at work in the last ten to twenty years or so, to a much broader tacit social consensus within the popular forces as a whole. (Which is not to mention the distinct but related controversies about the role of the state, parliamentary democracy, and so on.) When it comes to these sorts of quandaries, we are only at the beginning of being able to see our way through to answers which make sense in terms of the political changes we can see going on around us.

1. As Joyce Stevens makes clear in her contribution to the recent volume *Moving Left: The Future of Socialism in Australia* (1986), entitled 'The Politics of Re-constructing Socialism', pp. 149-163

2. Eric Aarons, 'Linking Class and Movement', *ALR* 83, Autumn 1983, p. 9.

3. Ben Fine et al, *Class Politics: An Answer to its Critics* (1984), pp. 3 & 63.

4. Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation* (1982), p. 247.

5. And of course — as veterans of the era hardly need to be told — the Popular Front's experience and its lessons remain the major historical antecedent of many of our current ideas about politics and hegemony, particularly in the debates around Eurocommunism. A rough outline of this lineage was sketched in *Tribune*, 11.9.85.

6. Beatrix Campbell, 'Politics, Pyramids and People', *Marxism Today*, December 1984, p. 26.

7. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985). See also the more intelligible if more limited account of 'class' essentialism in Laclau's earlier book *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977), in ch. 3.

8. The debt to Derrida is clear from the latter's essay 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' in *Writing and Difference* (1978), where he imagines the concept of structure without a 'given' centre.

9. The citation is from Hal Foster's introduction to the popular collection of essays published in Britain as *Postmodern Culture* and in the US as *The Anti-Aesthetic* (1983, 1982), p. xv.

10. Cited by Ian Chambers and Lidia Curti in their essay 'A Volatile Alliance: Culture, Popular Culture and the Italian Left' in *Formations of Nation and People* (1984), p. 118.

11. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 'Socialist Strategy: Where Next?', *Marxism Today*, January 1981, p. 22.

12. Colin Mercer, 'A Poverty of Desire: Pleasure and Popular Politics', in *Formations of Pleasure* (1983), p. 88.

13. Stuart Hall, 'The Culture Gap', *Marxism Today*, January 1984, p. 19.

14. Stuart Hall in fact recently noted that it was precisely this problem which led him into the territory of his important analysis of the ideological underpinnings of 'Thatcherism' in Britain; 'Authoritarian Populism: A Reply to Jessop et al', *New Left Review* 151, 1985, p. 119.