uncritical perspective on, typically regarding any criticism of orthodox medicine as the province of cranks. All of this suggests the centrality of the means of communication, information, dialogue and debate and therefore democracy to any future socialist project. This reminds us of one of Hall’s central arguments, namely that a socialist politics does not issue automatically from questions of economy, ownership and class. It is a politics that has to be constructed.

Hall was under no illusions about how dangerous the democratic erosion of the prerogatives of private ownership and the imperatives of the accumulation logic might be: ‘The problem is that the positive commitment to the serious, dangerous and difficult task of unpacking the oldest capitalist system in the world, and beginning to construct some other system – without triggering off “barbarism” – will require a great deal of popular will, mobilisation, commitment and nerve’.62

Here is a very substantive reason for being concerned to engage in and win the ideological struggle. For although it may be said that the dominant social order only requires consent patchily in order for it to reproduce itself, a genuine transformation away from capitalism will need to mobilise popular participation against the continuing control over powerful economic, political and State apparatuses that will be leveraged by the dominant classes against any democratic change.

Going forwards, facing backwards

With all the usual caveats regarding reductionism, I have tried to present in a diagrammatic form some of the key dynamics of political cultures that have formed the three hegemonic blocs discussed in the course of this book (see Figure 8.1). Historic blocs are forged out of alliances between political cultures and the class constituencies they assemble. The nineteenth-century historic bloc was forged out of an alliance between conservatism and liberalism. The material base of conservatism was in the coercive State and civil society; it left the market free to do as it wished by default. Liberalism was identical with its economic base in the market (economic liberalism) and explicitly propounded the market (as opposed to the State) as the source of progressive norms, but it still nevertheless needed and had a subordinate role in the State apparatus. This was the terms of the balance of power and division of labour within the ruling power bloc between conservatism and liberalism with the coercive State and the coercions of the market both providing the necessary force to seal degrees of consent. The vertical arrows indicate the original and persistent ways that shapes and defines the respective political cultures (i.e. its relationship with either the State or the free market). However, we have also seen in the formation of the second historic bloc (social democracy) and the third historic bloc (neo-liberalism) conservatism and liberalism make a ‘knight’s move’ towards combining the material base of other political cultures directly into their repertoire. By the end of the nineteenth century, liberalism had separated itself from economic liberalism and developed into a new liberalism in which reform requires a social State. This liberalism combined with the labour movement was the basis of social democracy, although the conservative version of social democracy that Stuart Hall was rightly very critical of. The third historic bloc saw conservatism make a knight’s move towards the territory of
the market as an explicit programme to mobilise a normative project around what had once been the basis of late eighteenth and early-to-
mid-nineteenth-century liberalism. And we saw that social liberalism
in time oscillated back from social democracy to make its peace with
this new settlement, this new suture of social forces around economic
liberalism. Now this third historic bloc is facing its own midnight hour.
We must remember that the competitive tensions between political
cultures interact with the contradictions between them and the mode
of production. But the current historic bloc will not dismantle itself
and given time and space it could find once more temporary solutions to its
‘incurable structural contradictions’ (Gramsci) most likely around the
kind of populist and nationalist right wing politics that Trump and his
coalition – which includes fascists – represent.

Given the current starting point of the Left, whose recent revival
is actually quite shallow in the UK and whose culture has been badly
deformed by four decades of defeat, the only realistic prospect available
in the short to middle term, of exiting the current conjuncture in a
progressive direction, is to forge a new historic bloc around social
democracy. However, this must be a social democracy that has learned
some of the lessons of recent history to guard against future iterations
of economic liberalism. The main historical lesson we must absorb is,
unfortunately, extremely difficult: namely that social democracy cannot
be a stable end-destination within the dynamics of capitalism. For
capitalism, every boundary to its accumulation dynamic, such as political
regulation of the profit motive, or public services, is an obstacle that
must be surmounted. This is the essential and remorseless characteristic
of capital.\(^1\) Such dynamics are intensified as capital declines into long-
term stagnation with low or no growth.\(^2\) As capital hordes wealth it drains
effective demand out of the economy while its global mobility facilitates
avoidance of national jurisdictions that impose social obligations.
Therefore we need a different version of social democracy from the one

that was in place before. We need a radical model of social democracy
that empowers a knight’s move from social democracy to socialism, a
move from a historic bloc based on the social State to a historic bloc
where the dominant forms of productive property are held, through a
diversity of forms, in common. The international dimension of capital
means that this cannot succeed in one country alone, but we can only be
responsible for our own national terrain. In closing then I want to look
at what we have learned through a Gramscian lens about the formation
of Britishness over the last two hundred odd years so that we can remind
ourselves of where the bases for a new historic bloc could be formed.

The formation of a new historic bloc requires a continual struggle with
the economic, political, cultural and ideological bases of the dominant
power bloc. The battle of hearts and minds is particularly important in
the period leading up to and immediately after the taking of political
(governmental) power, as the rise of Thatcherism shows us. We can also
look at the history of the dominant power bloc and learn something
else – namely what Gramsci I believe was asking us to learn: the need to
build alliances (a complex business in any modern society) to broaden
and mobilise the popular support necessary to counter the counter-
offensive when it comes. The battle for hearts and minds is important
because of its capacity to mobilise ‘people power’ against the medium-
term persistence of economic, political and State power continuing to
reside with the privileged minority both within the nation-state and
outside and ‘above’ it.

Firstly, a new historic bloc built around a new model of social
democracy must have as its material and political cultural basis the
public. This itself will require a complex and ongoing struggle on
many fronts. We saw that the concept of the public developed from its
most anti-democratic version, around an aristocratic/bourgeois elite
dominance of the coercive apparatus and ritualistic-ideological State
apparatus. It was challenged and partly democratised by the professional
and commercial middle classes, especially in connection with industry
in which a more dynamic, scientific and transformative sense of work
and society emerged. But the most radical and democratic concept of
the public came out of working class struggles and demands to socialise
wealth and uncouple use value from exchange value.

In our present moment, the public as a concept and value has been
subjected to four decades of de-legitimation and lack of investment by
economic liberalism.\(^3\) We cannot doubt the extent to which that has

8.1 Material bases for political cultures.
sunk deep roots into popular consciousness. Hall noted that the public sector, public services and public intervention have been devastatingly de-legitimated by Thatcherism. Economically it has been associated with spending money that the nation does not have; it is a form of profligacy that ends in tears – as if the capitalist economy functioned without borrowing and debt. Indeed so persistent has this ideological discourse been that the Conservative Party and the media successfully managed to fix in the public mind during 2010–15 that it was Labour’s public spending that caused the global financial crash of 2007–8 rather than out of control banks and financial speculators.

As Grierson’s political communications project shows (see Chapter 5), we have to find ways of making a democratic and participatory civic identity vivid for people; we have to find ways of dramatising the connection between private lives and experiences and their public environment and involvement. We have had four decades of experiments in neo-liberal governance which has left a mountain of evidence of many failures and negative consequences stemming from the privatisation of public assets, the marketisation of what are formally public services, the penetration of State services by private contractors and the substantial weakening of the regulatory responsibilities that once imposed some public, social duties on the profit motive. There is plenty of space here to make tactical interventions to begin to organise popular resentments about rising energy and rail prices (as well as shareholder returns) into alternative policy programmes that revalidate the public sphere and ethos. Market failure is everywhere about us but mainstream political discourse sees it not.

The public is a crucial concept, as Hall argued, because it directly attacks the very foundation of capitalism: the profit motive and the capturing of surpluses by undemocratic and unaccountable organisations. This is why the political culture of economic liberalism has expended so much effort in attempting to erode popular support and identification for the public as a concept and mode of practice. The public as concept makes use and need rather than exchange value its priority and therefore, against stratified access to resources, it is a much better basis for providing universal access for fundamental services.

The public sector and the public services provides the material underpinning for an alliance between the working and middle classes, precisely the alliance which has frayed as economic liberalism has dismantled social democracy and made the financial resources people have in their pockets an increasingly determining factor in satisfying their needs. Yet the social base of economic liberalism is contracting and the trend is towards oligarchical rule in which a large middle class will also struggle to find jobs, housing, healthcare and other opportunities. Indeed there is probably only one or two more generations of accumulated assets available to the middle class to be used up or expropriated by ‘big capital’ and a housing crash could consume those assets even more quickly. Yet despite there being a strong material interest at stake that might prise at least some of the middle class away from economic liberalism, we know from Hall, that it will not happen automatically, because the ‘logics of ideological inference turn out to be … multivariate’, 4 In Latin America for example, oligarchies keep a fairly impoverished middle class in line by stoking their fears of the poor, the rabble, or the mob, who are all made synonymous with crime and violence. On present trends, there is nothing to stop Britain converging with Latin American levels of inequality and authoritarianism in the decades to come. The gated communities springing up in the cities are perhaps a foretaste of things to come in that regard.

So, at least some strata of the middle classes will need to be won around with more than just the promise of being material beneficiaries of a reinvigorated public sphere. One of the historic attractions of public service to the middle classes was the idea, as Weber argued, of work as a moral duty, with a wider social purpose. The fullest possibilities of developing a work ethic with a wider social purpose are only realised when work is uncoupled from exchange value, as it is with public services. Four decades of economic liberalism has been an object lesson in how the profit motive corrupts and corrodes trust, reciprocity, professional autonomy, meaningful activity and the virtues of forward planning. Market rationality turns out to be deeply irrational time and time again. The dogma that competition produces ‘efficiency’ stands exposed as a cruel lie as bureaucracy expands to monetise every transaction, as marketing budgets balloon to conceal cutbacks in the most precious resources (such as workers) and as legal departments expand to ward off litigation from increasingly ill-served ‘customers’. This is to say nothing of the corruption of public service and public officials by commercial forces in such areas as housing by predatory property developers. There is plenty of opportunity here to make a reconstructed public sphere morally attractive once more as a source of pride and satisfaction, for both workers and users of those services. While this may be particularly
appealing to the middle classes, it is certainly not exclusively a middle-class value to feel an ethical pride in work performed. The values of skilled, craft and artisanal labour have long had similar ethical underpinnings. Less individualistic than middle-class investments in work, this cluster of values has often been about achieving a compensatory sense of respect that is withheld elsewhere in society. The appeal of a 'good job' that is skilled and meaningful has been stubbornly adhered to by many working class people resentful and unimpressed by the low-wage and low-skill economy that the employers have prepared for them.

Thus far I have framed the concept of the public in ways that are familiar from the historic bloc of social democracy past. But we have seen that this was a top down version of social democracy which in party-political terms meant monopolising political participation and legitimate politics around the Labour Party and parliament, where the great and the good assemble and electoral politics. In political terms, the working classes were conceived of as passive recipients of the benefits of the system. In broader social terms, the middle class ran the institutions as benevolent but unaccountable leaders. When Hall wrote of 'breaking the mould of working class common sense' I think he was, not untypically, blind to an even greater blockage in the development of a radical social democracy: breaking the mould of middle-class common sense. The old model of the public had middle class buy in because it protected and reinforced middle-class investments in status, esteem, and hierarchy. Visitors from other capitalist countries are immediately struck by just how embedded these features of British class divisions are. Perhaps here we do see the enduring marks of Britain's peculiar historic development and the very long alliance between a traditional conservatism (with its aristocratic colouration) and liberalism. Difficult as it is, the educator must be educated, and a critical self-reflexivity that has been rare among the British middle classes concerning their class subjectivity, with its entrenched sense of self-entitlement, would need to be nurtured. This can only be done by the development of friendly but critical interlocutors in the form of organic intellectuals from the working classes. This itself is now a huge and urgent task. The scale of the repair needed on the political consciousness, confidence and articulacy of the working classes after decades of assault by economic liberalism, is immense. Yet there can be no real progressive change in Britain unless the social base for political and cultural participation on equal terms is widened in class terms – a widening that will necessarily include the heterogeneous

ethnicities to be found at the 'base' of society. What is needed today is a shift in the middle-class intelligentsia on a par with that which took place in the 1930s, itself premised on a longer and slower shift which the new liberalism of the previous half-century or so had prepared. If political and cultural participation on equal terms can happen then perhaps a dialogue that can cut across existing inequalities and divisions of labour can begin that would foster non-antagonistic social development. That 'dialogue' would need an immensely transformed public sphere, in politics, in the media (including, crucially, the development of a non-corporate media) in education, and in the trade unions. Needless to say, trade unions must be unshackled from the legal framework that has rendered them powerless against employer offensives. Again, a major public relations battle should be fought to reframe the role of the trade unions as at present small islands of democratic counterweight to unaccountable management power. A new radical multi-cultural plebeian identity based in communities as much as in the workplace, needs to make its way into the heart of British identity.

The concept of the public, Hall reminded us, ought to be distinct from the concept of the State, although the latter is the necessary guarantor of the former. Diverse strands on the left became from the 1990s onwards, disengaged with State apparatuses, in a move towards 'horizontalism', social movements, anti-party structures, and neo-anarchist and syndicalist currents, amid a desire to carve out niche spaces within capitalism that tacitly gave up trying to transform it. The positive side of this development is precisely the percolation into civil society of the kind of small-scale 'molecular' experiments that can seed innovations in local and community ventures. Such libertarian yet community orientated impulses are important assets and Gramsci was clear that both the normative historic justification of capitalism and its strength in depth, lay in the relatively autonomous initiatives which civil society, mirroring economic life, had developed. Currently dominated by the tactical multiplicity and autonomy of the dominant classes, Gramsci's conception of civil society looks forward to enlarging civil society for the subaltern classes – and thereby deepening democracy. Yet without an engagement with the State, these molecular experiments, if they are truly antithetical to capital, will remain tiny and vulnerable. One of the transformations of the public that a radical form of social democracy would have to develop is to find ways of encouraging and resourcing the local and/or small-scale experiments in democratic
participation that develop the talents that our current society wastes, the initiative and individual and collective intelligence that is left idle. The particularly interesting and successful experiments could then be rolled out in more widely available forms as social-public 'franchises'. We could do worse than start with the democratic transformation of football clubs as an intervention into a popular leisure time activity that already has mass working class involvement and widespread simmering resentments among fans against corporate owners.

Another area that the State remains the indispensable guarantor of, financially and legally, in the development of non-State power and participation, is the whole terrain of collective, common and community ownership of productive resources. Again, this would require the development of experiments in civil society and the development in the skills and capacities to work collectively, collaboratively and with accountable forms of decision-making in the allocation of resources and the strategic development of plans both inside collectively owned organisations and in conjunction with wider community involvement. Existing successful cooperatives, surviving against all the odds in a hostile environment, are the obvious place to start to look for models that could be developed and supported by strategic thinking about supply chains for these worker controlled collectives. A network that begins to establish a commons would begin to redefine wealth and produce, just as the universalisation of the market in labour-power now does, its own 'spontaneous' forms of social consciousness that can then be elaborated by civil society organs. The material and ideological complexes which capitalism's 'dull compulsion of economics' currently produces can only be contracted by developing more choices for labour so that it has greater leverage against employers and the market in labour-power.

The small-scale and the local is also a good way of driving a wedge between big capital and small businesses. The latter has often provided an important and influential layer of support for what are essentially the aims and interests of monopoly capital. Crucial here is the confusion that is often made between capital and the market. Looked at historically, we can see this is an ideological strategy, for markets have long pre-existed capitalism. What capital did was to turn markets into a accumulation model by commodifying labour on a universal basis and capturing the surplus value of that labour-power. By differentiating between big capital and small businesses, between capital and the market as a form of trade and exchange in goods (but not labour-power) a very potent ideological weapon (the market) can be partly neutralised. Small businesses, which are often only sole traders or employing a handful of people, are not part of that accumulation imperative by definition. They are, however, extremely vulnerable to the power of big capital and the resources it can mobilise to squeeze small businesses out of markets and communities. If hegemony means building alliances and reconciling tensions between different interests in order to weaken the power of capital, then prising a chunk of small businesses away from monopoly capital would be a smart tactical move to achieve the strategic goal of weakening the power of capital to mobilise support from outside the power bloc.

The differentiations between big capital and small businesses would provide a way of exposing the unaccountable power of big capital to lobby local and national governments or hoard desperately needed investment that has been expropriated from society. We need political leadership that blows the whistle on how big capital operates and amplifies the anti-corporate campaigns of the late 1990s and early 2000s. By contrast, many small business start-ups are motivated by social and cultural purposes that can also be better guaranteed by the development of public service frameworks within which to work. As Hall noted, 'most of the innovatory trends in everyday life with which younger people spontaneously identify – in music, clothes, styles ...' operate on this artisanal basis.' Small businesses desperately need loans that the private sector is notoriously reluctant to advance. Public investment can provide extra leverage to bind businesses into public and cultural purposes while legal tools could both prevent automatic take-overs by big capital without substantial compensation to the public purse and triggers that would convert small businesses to collective ownership models if they grow to a certain size.

In the period of social-democratic formation, industry was the basis for the political imaginary of industrialism. It represented a fusion between the labour movement and liberalism (the working class and sections of the intelligentsia of the middle class) and its limited success represented a short-term accommodation of it by industrial capital and the other key sectors. At the cultural level industrialism had a significant impact on British national identity, making the working class a legitimate, important and even respected component of the national imaginary in a way that had not been the case in the nineteenth century. In time, the social-democratic historic bloc led to material improvements in the lifeworld of the working class and some redressing
of economic inequalities through the growth of the social State or public provision as well as a more regulated labour market. Industrialism had a number of strengths as the core part of this political culture. It allied the workers' movement with modernity – always a powerful if ambiguous cultural resource. It gave this cultural project a clearly defined agency in the form of the industrial worker who was now imbued with a powerful normative justification as at the very least necessary to the economic wealth of the country or even, in more Marxist versions, the source of economic wealth. The production of useful things that give identity to cities (Sheffield steel for example) and regions (Lancashire cotton) or the nation (the British car industry with its specific models such as the Rolls Royce and the Mini) and that find their way into everyday use, helped make industry a tangible, durable and enriching part of people's lives. The contrast here is with banking and finance, which is seen as fickle, mobile, or rather not seen at all, part of 'invisible earnings' that benefit a tiny elite. This contrast became acute during the Reagan and Thatcher years as the City of London and Wall Street boomed once more and domestic manufacturing in Britain and the United States declined, exposed as they were to international competition and global capital flows moving in and out of countries to maximise the advantages of local conditions (which get progressively worse for the majority in a race to the bottom to attract capital investment). Even in this period of contraction for industry (at least in the advanced Western countries) popular culture often articulated a critique of capitalism by making a distinction between finance and banking and industrial, manufacturing or artisanal work where 'real people' made things that are useful and enjoyable for other people. Today, banking scandals and revelations about British-connected tax havens provide ample opportunities to throw British finance and service sector capital on the defensive and repatriate private offshore wealth for national public purposes.

Although there is an ongoing debate about how large British manufacturing remains (depending on what is included in the statistics), what is indisputable is that the political culture that was once attached to it, has been very largely dismantled. Yet this history continues as popular memory as we try to make sense of where we are now. Films such as Made in Dagenham (2010) about the strike for equal pay by women workers on Ford’s production line, and Pride (2014) about the alliance between striking miners and the Gay and Lesbian community in the 1984–5 conflict, continue to resonate with the wider public. It is as if a hole has been torn in our symbolic cultural order and we are trying to figure out what it means, what has been lost and how to go forward on the different terrain we now find ourselves in.

Despite its rhetorical power, industrialism had a number of weaknesses, of course. While it had a clear agent that could be seen to underpin the social-democratic historic bloc, that agent was very sector specific, i.e. it was grounded in a few extractive and manufacturing industries although there was some crossover with some of the services in the public sector. Yet the romance of the male worker in what were seen as the key industrial sectors dominated the political imaginary, potentially narrowing the social base for social democracy or at least opening up routes of recruitment to the economic liberal project when social democracy clashed with and declined in relation to capitalist imperatives. One indicator of how powerfully the identification between the industrial worker and social democracy or socialism was, is that with the contraction of industry in the west and the expansion of the service sector, it became common to think that there was no longer such a social subject as ‘the working class’ or that we had moved into a qualitatively different era in which wealth production no longer revolved around an inherently antagonistic relationship.

The other major weakness of industrialism is that it often lacked sufficient clarity of the different economic-class interests at play within industry. Politically this could lead to illusions about alliances with industrial capital against finance capital and its powerhouse the City. At a policy making level it underestimated how difficult it is to work out the institutional mechanisms for making privately held wealth that is subject to competitive accumulation dynamics, democratically accountable to the demos. Industry was always embedded into and part-and-parcel of wider capitalist social relationships that make reform or ‘modernisation’ very difficult to implement, to implement successfully and to implement successfully over the long term.

A very important dimension to the current state of the British national-popular is the divide between the north and the south, and especially and increasingly between London and the other major cities. The value of goods and services that London has monopolised per head of the population is seven times that of its nearest ‘rival’ Greater Manchester. These distorting asymmetries of growth are making both London and the north increasingly unviable in the long term. People feel and know this – but once again, it requires political will to crystallise these sentiments and articulate them into popular images and policy proposals.
that will do more than tinker at the edges. The north continues to suffer disproportionately from the planned de-industrialisation that Thatcherism initiated in the 1980s. Discussing the Miners’ Strike of 1984–5, Stuart Hall was critical of the terms in which it was fought. Instead of a conservative defence of coal, a more offensive ‘Gramscian’ stance would have been to pose both the question of a necessary shift away from fossil fuels and how that long transition could be managed and planned for in a way that it was not ‘borne by the sectors of the society who are most vulnerable to technological change, who are simply then thrown on the scrapheap of history, their communities and cultures offered up on the altar of efficiency and “modernization”’. Such a position would have struck at the heart of capital and the market as a morally justifiable allocation of resource mechanism. A different version of the national-popular can mobilise sentiments of national identity against the dominant mobilisers of national identity by exposing the gap between their rhetoric and the reality of national divisions and exploiting the contradiction between conservative nationalism and British capitalism’s continuing and historic overseas orientation (and hence national underinvestment).

The question of democratic accountability over what Habermas once called the unaccountable steering mechanisms of money and political power is most starkly posed in relation to the existential threat of climate change. One suspects that what worries capital most here is that deep down, in order to address this major threat to humanity, capital’s representatives know that it will require the kind of extensive coordination and planning that curbs the freedom of private property to do as it pleases. But it is not only climate change but all the negative costs which capitalist production externalises into the environment and into the bodies of human beings which must be confronted. With cancer now affecting one in two people in the west, we can truly say that capitalism’s toxicity has reached unprecedented levels. Socialism can recover modernity as a powerful resource to think the future by shifting the concept away from the temporal dimension (merely the old/new) and versions of technological determinism and articulating it to public service, common forms of property, democratic accountability and ecologically sustainable and life-enhancing production.

Engaging with the British State and mobilising it against its own dominant interests is of course a highly contradictory prospect. We have seen that conservatism has long dominated the coercive and ritualistic departments of the State and that these have been formidable shapers of a reactionary British national-popular identity. However in my assessment of the Nairn/Anderson thesis I also argued that conservatism has always had to have competitive partnerships with other political cultures within any of the three historic blocs that have shaped Britishness in the period we have been studying. By eclipsing the presence and role of liberalism within the British historical experience, Nairn and Anderson deployed an overly functionalist version of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. While dominant in the State apparatus, within the first historic bloc, laissez-faire principles were dominant in the economy and liberalism was the political culture that best articulated them. Conservatism’s social, spatial and temporal distillation from production at the cultural level was perfectly compatible with letting the market operate with less and less in the way of impediments of custom and habit. Cultural norms dualistically opposed to the economy were all the more necessary precisely because the latter was legitimised by an abstract rationality, scientism and positivism that evacuated any notion of the moral good. Yet civil society was not seamlessly dominated by conservatism but by a partnership between conservatism and liberalism that was not without tensions. Those tensions intensified with the rise of the labour movement and the emergence of social liberalism (the new liberalism) as distinct from economic liberalism. These conflicts between political cultures have also interacted with the contradictions between conservatism and economic liberalism, even as they fused together in a new configuration after the rise of Thatcherism. The old dualistic model between conservative culture and free market that characterised conservatism in the nineteenth century has become harder to sustain. The tendency for economic liberalism to liquidate the moral-cultural universe of its conservative partner has become more pronounced.

For this reason, even the State institutions that conservatism has made its own are not impregnable. Indeed the unleashing of economic liberalism has hollowed out both the institutions of conservative Britain and the deferential attachments to those institutions, while at the same time, the motor of economic liberalism has come to a spluttering near-stop. Simultaneously the main party-political vehicle of conservatism – the Conservative Party – is in turmoil – as is the alliance between conservatism and social liberalism – over Britain’s future relationship with the EU. In such circumstances the remaining conservative institutions look dangerously exposed. There is little popular feeling for the House of Lords, stuffed as it is with politicians who have been rejected
by the public at the ballot box, while the political class in the Commons is widely seen as in need of a major change in composition. The powerful nexus between the Treasury and the City needs to be made visible to the public and then broken up as part of a campaign to 'clean up' the City. The monarchy meanwhile has been engaging in a very long-term public relations plan to recover the public affection which it catastrophically lost over the messy divorce between Charles and Diana and the latter's subsequent death in a car accident while being madly chased by the paparazzi. Both the divorce and the circumstances of the death (hounded by a celebrity-obsessed press) seem to illuminate some of the dynamics unleashed by conservatism that rebounded on conservative institutions. More seriously and substantively, anti-militarism after the 2003 Iraq War debacle has not receded and lies as a reservoir of popular feeling that could be mobilised to re-imagine British involvement in the world and shift it away from a morally and financially irresponsible nuclear deterrent – something which the Scottish referendum of 2014 already put on the agenda.

In Chapter 3 I also argued that the core proposition of the Nairn/Anderson thesis reversed the true causalities shaping the formation of British capitalism. According to them, a backward, reactionary ruling class whose social base was firstly in agriculture and then in the City, developed a political culture and set of institutions that thwarted the development of industrial capitalism and with it the development of a social base that could have supported a more democratic political culture within which working class ascendency could be constructed. I argued instead that the political and cultural superstructure that we have called Britishism has been consolidated because the historical development of British capitalism meant that it made sense to exploit its comparative advantage as an imperial and trading world power, within which industry took up a subaltern role in which it was indeed a beneficiary for a very long time. We should avoid evaluative assessments of British capitalism that rely on ahistorical teleological models of growth paths (i.e. to develop the forces of production), uncritical normative investments in 'good' capital, plans based on strategic alliances with industrial capital and avoidance of the historical record that British capitalism has been very profitable for the power bloc and a wider layer of middle-class retainers. Its decline in economic terms has been relative. Of more interest, has been the amassing of wealth at the top. An economy that is still among the top ten biggest in the world has a lot of wealth it can redistribute.

But my reassessment of the Nairn/Anderson thesis does not mean cultural and political cultural battles are 'secondary'. A differentiated but integrated economic base set the conditions for a differentiated but integrated repertoire of political cultures (conservatism and liberalism) that represented, organised and strategised (sometimes in conflicting ways) on behalf of that differentiated but integrated economic base. We also saw that the culture of industrialism eventually mobilised widespread sentiments against the dominant political cultures and helped seed social democracy as a significant section of liberalism oscillated away from economic liberalism into an alliance with the labour movement. Likewise today we must mobilise sentiments against the superstructures that have so badly served the demos (the centralised political system, the 'first past the post' electoral system, the patronage-stuffed Lords, the monarchy, the elite civil service, etc). A bold constitutional revolution – as was envisaged following a successful vote for Scottish independence – could act as a catalyst for energising political conversations and imaginaries about future change and would be an opportunity to embed the rights of common ownership and public rights, access and accountability as part of a new popular-national identity, one in which the historic exclusions in public life, along the lines of class, gender and race, are acknowledged and addressed. Undoubtedly, the hegemonic struggle requires winning over at least some groups and individuals who would today identify themselves within the liberal tradition, by pushing that tradition closer to the kind of radical liberalism and rapprochement with socialism that we saw in such figures as Hobson or Grierson, at their best.

There is clearly now a deep desire for an alternative to economic liberalism, to capitalism unleashed. Historically, that alternative, short of socialism, was social democracy. We must remember that the institutionalisation of social democracy did not happen in the context of peace and good will. Social democracy was born out of war, revolution, economic collapse and counter-revolution (fascism and Stalinism) and desperate struggles between 1914 and 1945. No one wants to go back to that but the contradiction between the very modest goals that many people would like to see right now and the resistance to implementing those very modest goals by the dominant power bloc can lead either to paralysis and demoralisation or, with the help of a Gramscian strategy, a deepening of political consciousness and an awakening to the historical options and responsibilities we have before us.