45-Degree Mediation &

the Dynamics of Progressive System Change

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1. Introduction: From the Progressive Dilemma to 45-Degree Mediation

Political life in the UK and more widely is marked by what can be termed a **progressive dilemma**: a contradiction between, on the one hand, a top-down, exclusionary and increasingly authoritarian politics – now ranging from far-right national populism to technocratic centrist social democracy – and, on the other, the fragility and fragmentation of radical civil society. Protest movements erupt and then decline; small, innovative organisations remain isolated; and progressive forces struggle to influence the vertically organised political state in any durable way. [

Neal Lawson's landmark Compass pamphlet *45-Degree Change: Transforming Politics from Below and Above* (2019) provided an influential response to this dilemma. Lawson proposed that transformative politics must be organised along a **45-degree axis**, connecting **horizontal civil society** – with its creativity, diversity and emergent forms of organisation – to **vertical institutions** – with their stabilising capacities and access to resources, law and policy.

Building on Lawson's original "**45-Degree Change Model 1.0**", this paper elaborates a **45-Degree Change Framework 2.0** that develops a more fine-grained understanding of systemic transformation. It does so by introducing four inter-related dimensions:

1. **Vertical assemblage(s)** – multi-layered, hierarchical formations associated with the capitalist state, platform capitalism and related institutions;
2. **Horizontal assemblage(s)** – multi-layered formations in civil society that harbour counter-hegemonic potentials;
3. A **45-degree zone of mediation** – a dynamic zone of intense contestation and hybridisation between these assemblages;
4. **Transitioning times** – a temporal dimension that conceptualises the step-by-step movement from the neoliberal "expanded present" towards a new socio-economic and political settlement.

Within this framework, **45-degree mediation** denotes the connective activities, ideas, organisations, technologies and temporal strategies that link, contest and hybridise horizontal and vertical forces. It is through this mediating system that an alternative, progressive **historical bloc**, in Gramsci's sense, might be constructed.
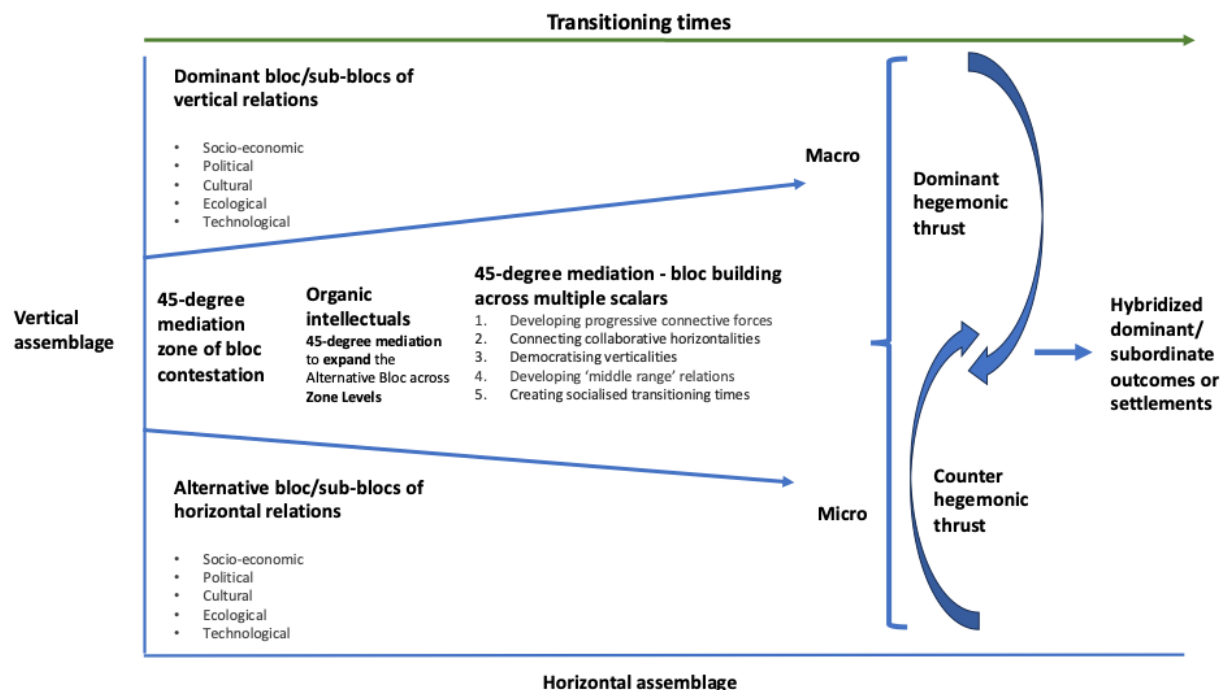
2. The 45-Degree Change Framework 2.0

2.1 Horizontal and vertical assemblages as competing historical blocs

The 2.0 framework re-conceptualises Lawson's original two axes as **"assemblages"** – multi-layered complexes of forces, factors and activities on both horizontal and vertical planes. These assemblages are interpreted as **competing historical blocs** in the Gramscian tradition.

- The **vertical assemblage** comprises nationally and transnationally organised economic, political, cultural and technological forces that sustain a **dominant, regressive historical bloc** – including varieties of capitalism, the national governmental state, platform capitalism and regressive organic intellectuals.
- The **horizontal assemblage** consists of civil society organisations, social movements, worker organisations, local governance, emergent structures, progressive media and digital alternatives that constitute the **foundations of an alternative progressive bloc**, albeit fragmented and under pressure.

The vertical assemblage has strong national and transnational coherence through the integration of state institutions, global markets and platform technologies. The horizontal assemblage tends to be more localised, networked and experimental, with limited institutional consolidation. Nevertheless, it is within the **horizontal world** that the impulses for progressive change primarily emerge (see Figure 1.)

Figure 1. The 45-Degree Change Framework

2.2 The 45-degree zone of progressive mediation

The **45-degree zone of mediation** expands Lawson's original "45-degree fault line of change" into a more developed conceptual space. Rather than a single line of contact between horizontal and vertical, it is conceived as a **zone of intense activity and contestation** in which elements of both assemblages interact, collide and hybridise.

This zone is:

- **Dynamic**, moving in response to shifts in the balance of forces between regressive and progressive blocs;
- **Multi-scalar**, extending from local sites of co-located governance and civil society to national and transnational arenas;
- **Janus-faced**, since both regressive and progressive forces attempt mediation, either to stabilise the regressive bloc (often via "passive revolution") or to construct a transformative alternative.

It is within this zone that **45-degree mediation** takes place, attempting to align forces "from below, from above and from the middle" into a synergistic **socio-political ecosystem**.

2.3 Transitioning times and the temporal dimension

The framework also introduces a **temporal dimension** – **transitioning times** – as an alternative to the neoliberal **"expanded present"** that freezes exploitative social relations while accelerating the pace of everyday life.

Transitioning times:

- Conceptualise the process of moving from the present polycrisis towards a **"New Settlement"** in which economic, ecological, political and cultural relations are reorganised;
- Are **multiple and uneven** – from urgent transitions (e.g. decarbonisation in a decade or so) to slower processes (e.g. rebuilding social bonds and trust);
- Open up space for **hope for the future**, countering contemporary experiences of political stasis and despair.

The temporality of **45-degree mediation** is therefore not linear or singular, but an assemblage of overlapping transition times and strategic horizons.

3. The Horizontal Assemblage: Radical Civil Society and Its Fragmentations

The **horizontal assemblage** is equated mainly with **civil society**, understood as a diverse sphere of voluntary associations, movements, networks, families, communities and local governance arrangements. It includes:

- **Protest movements** (e.g. Occupy, Me Too, Black Lives Matter, climate justice) that generate powerful cultural and political impulses but often struggle for lasting organisational consolidation;
- **Worker movements and trade unions**, historically the protective backbone of civil society, now weakened but renewing themselves through new organising strategies, including amongst precarious and gig-economy workers;
- **Emergent structures of civil society innovation** – local economic experiments, foundational economy initiatives, community wealth building, new mutualist and cooperative forms;
- **Progressive organic intellectuals** in education, media, think tanks and community organisations, whose influence is hampered by fragmentation and weak connection to political parties;
- **Social relations and collective identities** in communities and families, under pressure from neoliberal individualisation and far-right culture wars, yet still providing potential for solidaristic renewal;
- **Co-located horizontalities** – notably **democratic local and regional governance** and civic anchor institutions (universities, NHS trusts, colleges) that embody both horizontal and vertical features and are strategically located between citizens and the national state.

While rich in **innovation and diversity**, the horizontal assemblage suffers from:

- **Ideological fragmentation**: the absence of a leading transformative ideological project (akin to early 20th-century socialism) leaves multiple strands – climate justice, race and gender justice, anti-austerity, anti-imperialism – insufficiently connected;
- **Organisational dislocation**: decentralised and small-scale formations make coordinated action and resource aggregation difficult;
- **Repression and co-optation** by vertical powers: from legal restrictions on protest to passive-revolutionary incorporation of selected demands.

Hence the central **progressive task** at the horizontal level: **"connecting the bottom"** through common narratives, shared missions and 45-degree mediating practices.

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4. The Vertical Assemblage: Dominant Blocs, Varieties of Capitalism and Platform Power

The **vertical assemblage** encompasses the **hierarchic structures of power** that support the regressive historical bloc at both national and transnational levels. Key elements include:

- **Varieties of capitalism** – neoliberal, coordinated and state-led capitalisms;
- **Transnational capitalist institutions** such as the IMF and World Bank;
- **Technological platform capitalism**, dominated by Big Tech (Amazon, Apple, Google, Meta, etc.), associated with surveillance capitalism and emerging techno-feudalist dynamics;
- **Class-based social and economic relations**, in which nationally located capitalist classes seek to command political, cultural and technological resources;
- The **national governmental state**, including coercive apparatuses (army, police, security services) and the "national democratic state" (parliament, political parties, local and regional government);
- **Regressive organic intellectuals** – from right-wing media and think tanks to nationalist populist influencers – who construct and reproduce "neoliberal common sense";
- **Historical verticalities** such as monarchy, established religion, prestigious universities and elite schooling, which carry forward conservative traditions and symbolic power. The vertical assemblage is not monolithic; it is characterised by **hybridisations and tensions**:

- **Passive revolution**: incorporation of selected demands from radical civil society to construct new, compromised settlements preserving dominant power;
- **Democratic co-location**: sites such as elections, parliaments, local councils and international organisations (UN, WHO, etc.) where progressive forces can exploit contradictions and push democratising reforms;
- **Geopolitical realignment**: the decline of US-centred neoliberal dominance, rise of BRICS, and emerging techno-geopolitical competition (e.g. Chinese AI models) that destabilise existing hegemonies and open complex new terrains.

A central strategic implication is that **45-degree mediation** must not only connect to the vertical world, but also undertake a **democratic project to reform it** – from electoral systems and local governance to the political party form itself.

5. Defining 45-Degree Progressive Mediation

Within this broader framework, **45-degree progressive mediation** can be defined as:

An expansive politics led by progressive organic intellectuals that dialectically relate multiple horizontal and vertical forces, factors and activities into synergistic relations capable of building a progressive historical bloc.

Three principles are central:

1. **The 45-degree zone as a zone of intensive mediation**
   Mediation is not evenly distributed across social space. It is concentrated in a **"zone of bloc contestation"**, where horizontal and vertical forces collide – often where democratic institutions, local governance and civil society overlap. This zone is **mobile**, shifting according to political struggles and changes in the balance of power.
2. **Powers of relative autonomy**
   Civil society innovations have often prized **absolute autonomy** from the state and formal institutions. The mediation model argues instead for **relative autonomy**: sufficient independence to retain critical capacities and experimental energy, combined with strategically chosen **linkages to facilitating vertical structures**. "Freedom from" hierarchy is complemented by "freedom to" connect, scale, and transform wider relations.
3. **Hybridised relations and a political-economy ecosystem**
   Through mediation, elements of the horizontal and vertical become **hybridised**. Horizontally rooted actors adopt certain vertical features (stability, institutionalisation), while vertical institutions adopt horizontal characteristics (participatory and networked practices). The result is a **political-economy ecosystem** in which multiple mediating elements interact synergistically rather than remaining isolated.

Strong vs weak mediation

The concept of **strong** and **weak** mediation helps differentiate between:

- **Weak mediation** – individual or localised efforts that attempt improvements but lack supportive mediating factors (e.g. resources, organisations, political allies), remaining fragile and easily reversed;
- **Strong mediation** – where **several mediating elements combine** (actors, missions, organisations, technologies, material resources, time horizons) to produce **synergistic effects**, building momentum towards a progressive bloc.

The goal of 45-degree mediation is therefore to **assemble and align** multiple mediating elements into a dynamic ecosystem.

6. Key Elements and Capacities of 45-Degree Mediation

Drawing together insights from the 2.0 framework, the mediating system can be understood as an **assemblage of seven inter-linked elements**:

1. Mediating missions
2. Mediating actors (45-degree mediators)
3. Mediating thinking (the Organic Intellect)
4. Mediating organisations and middle-range governance
5. Mediating materiality (resources and infrastructures)
6. Mediating technologies (socialised AI and digital tools)
7. Mediating activities in time (transitioning strategies)

6.1 Mediating missions and common narratives

A central problem for radical civil society is the **lack of a common narrative** capable of connecting diverse struggles. Building on Mariana Mazzucato's idea of **"mission-oriented innovation policy"** targeting "wicked problems" such as climate change or ageing societies,[^4] 45-degree mediation emphasises **shared missions** as connective devices.

A candidate unifying mission is a **"peace-led Just Transition"** – bringing together:

- Rapid movement to **Net Zero** and ecological sustainability;
- **Social justice** for the most vulnerable;
- A commitment to **peaceful international relations** and de-escalation of global conflicts.

Such a mission language allows heterogeneous actors to affirm, in Gramscian terms, that **"we are different but we walk together"**, and offers a mediating narrative between local experiments, national politics and global transitions.

6.2 Mediating actors: 45-degree organic intellectuals

45-degree mediators are 21st-century **organic intellectuals** who operate across the horizontal and vertical worlds. They include teachers, researchers, trade unionists, journalists, civil servants, professionals in health and education, tech workers, community organisers, local politicians and activists.

Their distinguishing features are:

- **Boundary-crossing roles**, working across institutions, sectors and scales;
- **Deep local knowledge** combined with systemic understanding of economic, ecological and political dynamics;
- **Shared mission orientation**, rather than narrow career or organisational interests.

These actors function as **connective tissue** in the historical bloc, forging alliances, translating concepts between domains and mediating conflicts within the zone of contestation.

6.3 Mediating thinking: from the socialised General Intellect to the Organic Intellect

45-degree mediation depends on a distinctive form of **mediating thinking** that combines:

- **Progressive horizontal thinking – the "socialised General Intellect"**: collective knowledge produced in civil society, encompassing political, economic, ecological and cultural awareness, and acting as the **"ideological glue"** of solidarity.[^3]
- **Progressive vertical thinking – specialist expertise oriented to systemic change**: technical and professional knowledge, embedded in institutions, capable of designing and implementing structural reforms and innovations.

When these dimensions are **dialectically related**, they form what has been termed the **integral "Organic Intellect"** – an integrative capacity that:

- Deepens horizontal practices with technical and strategic sophistication;
- Infuses vertical innovation with democratic, ethical and ecological orientation;
- Mirrors the overall 45-degree model by relating horizontal and vertical thinking through synergistic 45-degree relations.[^2]

Neal Lawson's observation is crucial here: the knowledge world cannot be transformed from below alone; nor can vertical expertise act progressively without being informed by horizontal experiences.

6.4 Mediating organisations and middle-range governance

Effective mediation also requires **organisational forms** that straddle the horizontal and vertical assemblages:

- **Middle-range local and regional governance** – located between citizens and the national state, capable of translating national policy into local strategies, coordinating economic and ecological development, and nurturing civil society. Despite being weakened by austerity, this level has been partially revitalised through city-regional authorities and mayoral leadership.
- **Civic anchor institutions** – universities, colleges, NHS trusts, local cultural institutions – which can act as stabilising nodes for local ecosystems and platforms for participatory governance.
- **The 45-degree political party** – a party form that combines **vertical leadership** (strategy, programme, legislative action) with **horizontal reflexivity** (listening to radical civil society, incorporating new practices, decentralised internal democracy), echoing earlier arguments about the "Very Modern Prince".[^5]

These organisations are crucial sites of **hybridisation** where horizontal and vertical logics intersect, and where long-term institutional supports for progressive mediation can be built.

6.5 Mediating materiality: resources and infrastructures

No mediation can be sustained without **material supports** – financial resources, physical spaces, infrastructures of communication, and organisational capacities. Within a **social ecosystem perspective**, mediating materiality includes:

- Public funding for local and regional governance;
- Support for civil society infrastructures and networks;
- Foundations and public development banks oriented to Just Transition missions;
- Shared digital infrastructures, data commons and platforms.

This material dimension links the **political economy** of mediation to questions of ownership, investment and control.

6.6 Mediating technologies: socialised AI and the technological General Intellect

Digital technologies and AI are currently dominated by **platform capitalism**, but they also offer opportunities for **socialised technological developments** to support mediation.

A **progressive approach to AI** views it as an **extension of human intelligence and mediating capacity**, rather than a replacement. Socially assistive AI and machine learning can support:

- Lateral communication and network organising in civil society;
- Research-based problem solving across complex fields (health, climate, sustainable production);
- New forms of collaborative production associated with "Industry 5.0".

This requires cultivating a **"technological General Intellect"** – a socio-technological consciousness that comprehends both the threats and possibilities of the AI revolution, and aligns technological innovation with democratic and ecological objectives.

6.7 Mediating activities in time: managing transition times

Finally, mediating activities unfold within and shape **transitioning times**. A progressive temporal model involves:

- Recognising **multiple temporalities**: urgent transitions (e.g. climate), medium-term institutional reforms (e.g. electoral reform, devolutions), and long-term cultural change;
- Developing **temporal strategies** that connect short-term campaigns with medium-range reforms and longer-term visions of a **New Settlement**;
- Re-balancing **accelerated economic time** with **"slowed down" social time**, enabling people to live well in the present while consciously acting for the future.

Time itself becomes a **field of mediation**, contesting the neoliberal colonisation of the future and re-opening historical horizons.

7. 45-Degree Socio-Political Ecosystem Dynamics

Taken together, these elements suggest that **45-degree mediation is most effective when it is ecosystemic**.

Rather than treating interventions as discrete projects, an **ecosystem approach**:

- Focuses on **relationships between elements** – missions, actors, organisations, technologies, resources and temporal strategies;
- Looks for **synergy** between connective forces from below and reformed structures from above, as already implicit in Lawson's 1.0 model;
- Seeks to cultivate **self-reinforcing loops** – for instance, where local governance reforms strengthen civil society, which in turn supports further democratisation of national institutions.

This ecosystem perspective also facilitates **comparative analysis** across different geopolitical contexts – West, East and the Global South – where varieties of capitalism, state forms and civil societies are configured differently. The 45-Degree Change Framework 2.0 is therefore not a blueprint but a **conceptual toolkit** to guide experimentation and learning in diverse settings.

8. Conclusion: 45-Degree Mediation as Strategy and Practice

The concept of **45-degree mediation** brings into focus the **connective work** required to move from a fragmented progressive landscape and a dominant regressive bloc to a **new, progressive historical bloc** capable of addressing the 21st-century polycrisis.

It emphasises that:

- Transformative change is neither purely bottom-up nor top-down, but arises from **dialectical relations** between horizontal and vertical worlds;
- Mediation is **multi-dimensional**, involving missions, actors, thinking, organisations, materiality, technologies and temporality;
- The strength of mediation depends on the **synergies** created between these elements within a dynamic **45-degree zone of contestation**;
- A **socio-political ecosystem lens** is necessary to understand how these elements co-evolve and how progressive blocs might be built and sustained.

If the **progressive dilemma** is to be overcome, the task is not only to expand radical civil society or to democratise the state, but to **institutionalise 45-degree mediation**: cultivating mediators, building mediating organisations, socialising technologies, and organising in and through multiple transition times.

In that sense, **45-degree mediation** is both a **theory of change** and a **practical strategy** for connecting the bottom, democratising the top and building the middle – the essential work of transitioning towards a fairer, more democratic and sustainable settlement.

References

[^1]: Lawrence Pratchett (2004). "Local Autonomy, Local Democracy and the 'New Localism'." *Political Studies* 52(2): 358–375.

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[^4]: Mariana Mazzucato (2018). "Mission-Oriented Innovation Policy: Challenges and Opportunities." *Industrial and Corporate Change* 27(5): 803–815.

[^5]: Compass (2018). *21st Century Party: A Democratic Left Networked Party*. London: Compass; Ken Spours (2016). *The Very Modern Prince: The 21st Century Political Party and Political Formation*. London: Compass.

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