

Building the alternative bloc through progressive mediation



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July 2025

Summary

Political life in the UK and more broadly is being shaped by a contradiction described here as ‘the progressive dilemma’. This comprises a continued top-down but increasingly failed exclusionary politics, of which Starmer’s Labour Government is the latest manifestation, mirrored by the fragilities of radical civil society with protest movements erupting and then subsiding, together with the fragmentation of small-scale progressive organisations unable to influence wider change.

An answer to this dilemma is what Neal Lawson has termed *45-degree change*. In his landmark 2019 Compass publication *45-Degree Change: Transforming Politics from Below and Above*, he explored the dynamics of a new progressive politics based on a reciprocal reforming relationship between horizontal civil society movements and vertically organised institutions. The political state could be democratised by its interaction with radical civil society and horizontally based organisations and movements could achieve more durable impacts through support from reformed established institutions. This innovation has been termed here the *45-Degree Change Model 1.0*.

This paper elaborates the 1.0 Model and its core argument through an expanded conceptual toolkit comprising – the horizontal assemblage of civil society; the vertical assemblage of hierarchic power; a dynamic 45-degree zone of mediation and the temporal dimension of socialised transitioning time. These four dimensions combine to form the *45-Degree Change Framework 2.0*, providing a fine-grained analysis of dominant structures that supports neoliberal hegemony along with an analysis of new structures, forces, strategies and practices in support of transitioning to fairer, more democratic and sustainable futures.

The 2.0 Framework is theoretically informed by the Gramscian concept of ‘historical bloc’, suggesting that the vertical assemblage constitutes the spine of the dominant and regressive bloc, while the horizontal assemblage has the potential to become the foundations of an alternative progressive bloc. Acting between these, the zone of progressive 45-degree mediation is seen as an area of intense political activity where the two blocs compete for power and influence. The historical bloc analysis is supplemented by the idea of ‘socio-political ecosystem dynamics’, as a way of understanding how a progressive democratic bloc and counter hegemony might be built through synergistic activity of connecting the horizontal, democratising the vertical and building from the middle and creating a unifying concept of socialised transition time.

Glossary of key terms

Horizontal assemblage(s): Multiple forces, factors, and activities in civil society that presently supports a potential counter hegemony, including its alignments and contradictions.

Vertical assemblage(s) - multiple hierarchical forces, factors, and activities that presently supports the exercise of regressive hegemony by the dominant historical bloc, including its alignments and contradictions.

Regressive historical bloc - the dynamic combination of regressive economic, social, political and cultural forces, factors and activities, largely vertical in character, that function to sustain ruling class hegemony.

Progressive historical bloc: a synergistic formation of progressive economic, technological, social political and cultural forces, factors and activities, largely horizontal in character, aimed at constructing a 21st-century progressive counter-hegemony.

Passive revolution – a process of significant social and political change that occurs without a direct, active popular involvement, involving gradual reforms and transformations initiated by the ruling class to maintain its hegemony.

45-degree change: A model for transformative societal change through dialectical relationships between horizontal civil society and vertical institutional structures.

45-degree fault line of change: The meeting point between the horizontal and vertical worlds as a crucible of creative politics.

45-degree zone of mediation: A space of intense mediation activity and contestation between horizontal and vertical forces and between opposing historical blocs.

Organic intellectuals: Individuals or groups who serve as bridge-builders between the horizontal and vertical assemblages, connecting everyday practices with the wider historical bloc. Organic intellectuals can be of a regressive or progressive type, related to which historical bloc they support.

Transitioning time: The temporal dimension in the change process involves understanding multiple transition times of varying durations unified through the idea of 'socialised time' and the promises of a common goal of a 'new settlement'.

The 45-Degree Change Model 1.0 – connecting the horizontal and vertical political worlds

The progressive dilemma

Political life in the UK and more broadly is being shaped by a contradiction of dominant and subordinate factors. The dominant factor is the intensification of an anti-democratic politics now led by a resurgent far-right national populism. This authoritarian and exclusionary politics has also spread to centrist social democracy. The subordinate element concerns the weaknesses of radical civil society. Protest movements that provide the lifeblood radical politics can erupt and then die away, leaving at best cultural legacies. Moreover, radical civil society organisations that provide a steady stream of new and potentially transformative ideas tend to remain small-scale and isolated from wider supportive structures. The inability radical civil society action to sufficiently influence the vertically organised political world is central to what is termed the ‘progressive dilemma’.

To address this historical contradiction Neal Lawson coined the term ‘45-degree change’. In his landmark 2019 Compass publication *45-Degree Change: Transforming Politics from Below and Above*¹, he explored the dynamics of a new progressive politics based on a reciprocal reforming relationship between horizontal civil society movements and vertically organised institutions. The 45-degree model sought to bridge the gap between grassroots activism and institutional power, in which the political state could be democratised by its interaction with radical civil society, while horizontally based organisations and movements could achieve more durable impacts through support from reformed established institutions.

His analysis began with a critique of the managerial and anti-democratic tendencies of political life in the UK - the authoritarianism of New Labour; the austerity policies of Cameron and Osborne; Corbyn’s ‘machine capture’ Left Turn and its electoral and political defeat; and Boris Johnson’s shambolic handling of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic – critiquing the managerial nature of UK politics, which has relied heavily on state instruments and prioritized the interests of party machinery over democratic engagement. While his primary focus was on the UK, he acknowledged that anti-democratic governance and political culture was part of a broader global phenomenon.

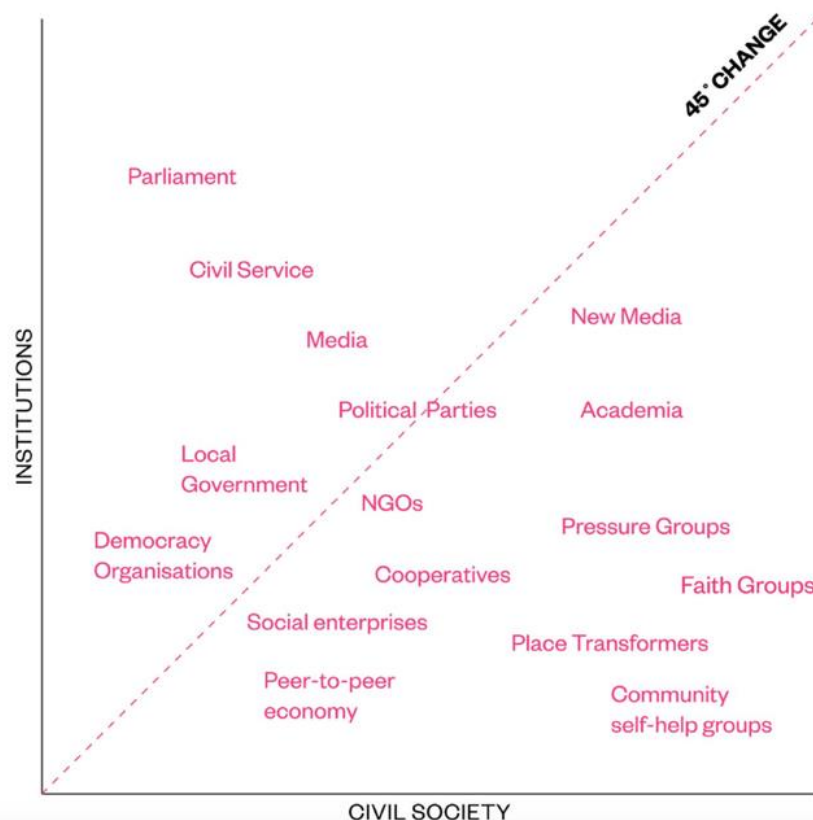
¹ Neal Lawson, N. 2019. *45° Change: Transforming Society from Below and Above*. London: Compass. Available at: <https://www.compassonline.org.uk> Accessed 28 February 2025.

Neal Lawson went on to applaud the vital role of progressive, creative thinking and the practices of radical civil society in driving change, while observing that social movements and campaigns often remained limited in scale and impact. Even when movements like *Occupy*, *Me Too*, and *Black Lives Matter* have erupted into widespread social protest, serving as the lifeblood of progressive change, their influence has tended to be transient with struggles to sustain long-term transformation. His analysis went on to highlight the need for a reimagined relationship between radical civil society and elements of the state. As a result, Neal Lawson introduced the concept of the '*45° fault-line of change*' to conceptualise potential synergies between the dynamic energies of radical civil society and the stability of institutional structures. Accordingly, his change model called for a rethinking of how bottom-up activism and top-down governance could intersect to create more equitable and democratic futures.

Change Model 1.0

The main features of the '45-Degree Change Model 1.0', illustrated in Figure 1, were built on the interplay between two axes - the *vertical axis of institutions* (representing formal structures of power, governance, and hierarchy) and the *horizontal axis of radical civil society* (encompassing grassroots movements, networks and informal organizations focused on change).

Figure 1. 45-Degree Change Model 1.0 (Lawson 2029)



The vertical axis provides stability, structure, and institutional leverage, while the horizontal axis brings energy, innovation, and collective agency from the ground up. Together, these form a dynamic framework to combine the solidity of vertically organised institutions with the fluidity and creativity of horizontal networks to foster creative and enduring progressive politics.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the lower horizontal segment of radical civil society is more populated than the upper vertical segment, reflecting Neal Lawson's emphasis on the pivotal role of horizontal relations and grassroots organization in driving progressive change. To underscore their importance, the final section of the 2019 think piece includes an extensive list of links to civil society organizations and networks already operating across various sectors of society.

'There is a cacophony of trial, experimentation and innovation going on: from new forms of local governance in Frome's flat-pack democracy, to the much-heralded Preston model for a foundational local economy, to trials for a citizen's income across Scotland, local currencies and the Transition Towns movement; from new trade unions for precarious gig workers and renters, to food banks, citizens' movements, fearless cities and so much more. People are sharing, caring, communing, creating, building, producing, inventing, and supporting – as never before'.

He went on to make an interesting distinction between 'designed' structures with hierarchies and rules and more networked 'emergent' structures.

'The emergent structures are created by the organisation's informal networks and communities of practice. The two types of structure are very different, and every organisation needs both kinds. Designed structures provide the rules and routines that are necessary for effective functioning. They provide stability. Emergent structures, on the other hand, provide novelty, creativity, and flexibility.'

From this initial analysis comes a two-fold facilitating role for the state in the 21st-century - to afford spaces where radical civil society can come together and, second, is to put itself at the service of the newly emerging participatory forces and organisations.

Key questions

At the end of the 2019 paper, Neal Lawson posed several important questions as part of the 'Next Steps', including how to:

- collaborate with civil society organizations (the horizontal)
- work with state actors at both national and local levels (the vertical)
- build bridges and alliances across the 45-degree divide?

The elaboration of a *45-degree 2.0 Change Framework* attempts conceptual answers to these questions.

The Annex summarises the main conceptual developments in the new 45-Degree Change Framework 2.0 compared with the original 1.0 model. Most aspects of the new Framework involve an expansion of dimensions of the 1.0 Model, with new elements including technological change and a chrono-dimension.

The 45-degree Change Framework 2.0

The twin crises driving an expanded analysis

With its compelling argument about potential political creativities arising from the dynamic between progressive civil society and facilitating state structures, the 1.0 Change Model laid the foundations for an expanded change framework to explore a range of transformative activities within what is now termed the 45-degree zone of 'progressive mediation' in an enlarged framework.

The movement from the 45-degree Change Model 1.0 to a 2.0 Framework has been driven by a fundamental twin crisis; a globally expanded expression of the progressive dilemma. The first is the neoliberal-led global poly crisis marked by economic and social polarizations of a failing economic and social orthodoxy and the intensification of geopolitical conflicts, most recently in Ukraine and the Middle East. These lead failings have contributed to the neglect of climate-nature emergency, the cumulative

effect of which has triggered of an era of mass migration. The second crisis concerns the failings of the alternative – the historical failure of authoritarian socialism, the all too evident shortcomings of the centrist social democracy (Biden’s and Starmer’s leadership being prime examples) and the limitations of protest and civil society movements despite their positive historical influence. Into this unstable political equilibrium has stepped 21st Century fascism, portraying itself as a ‘third force’ beyond established political parties, with the intention of upending a fragile democratic order and pushing back progressive movements, particularly those associated with race, gender and climate justice. This unstable triple relationship has been previously described as the ‘political three-body problem’ ².

A rapidly evolving poly crisis with its political fallout requires an analytical framework capable of comprehending the specificities of national contexts operating within the globalised relations. No longer simply a binary system of East/West, the past four decades has seen the emergence of different types of capitalism ³ – neoliberal capitalisms of the US, UK and Eastern Europe; Nordic and Germanic welfare and socialised capitalism; centralised state-led capitalisms in the East; and emerging economies and societies in the Global South. Together, these represent a new global multi-polarity, that is presently emerging in a chaotic form.

These complexities are reflected in the elaborated vertical and horizontal assemblages, straddling national and global contexts in the 2.0 Framework. At the same time, the expanded Framework conceptualises a potential progressive relationship between forces from below, structures from above and forms of governance in the middle, to create new types of democratic unity represented by progressive activity in the ‘45-degree zone of mediation’.

Dimensions of the 2.0 Framework

The 2.0 Change Framework comprises four related dimensions that expand the 1.0 model.

1. *Vertical and horizontal assemblages* - represent the leading features of the dominant and alternative historical blocs. The vertical assemblage comprises multiple hierarchically organised forces, factors

² Ken Spours. 2025. *The rise of national populism and the political three-body problem* London: Compass. Available at: <https://www.compassonline.org.uk/publications/national-populism-the-political-three-body-problem-regressive-chaos-and-progressive-stability-in-21st-century-politics/> accessed 28 February 2025.

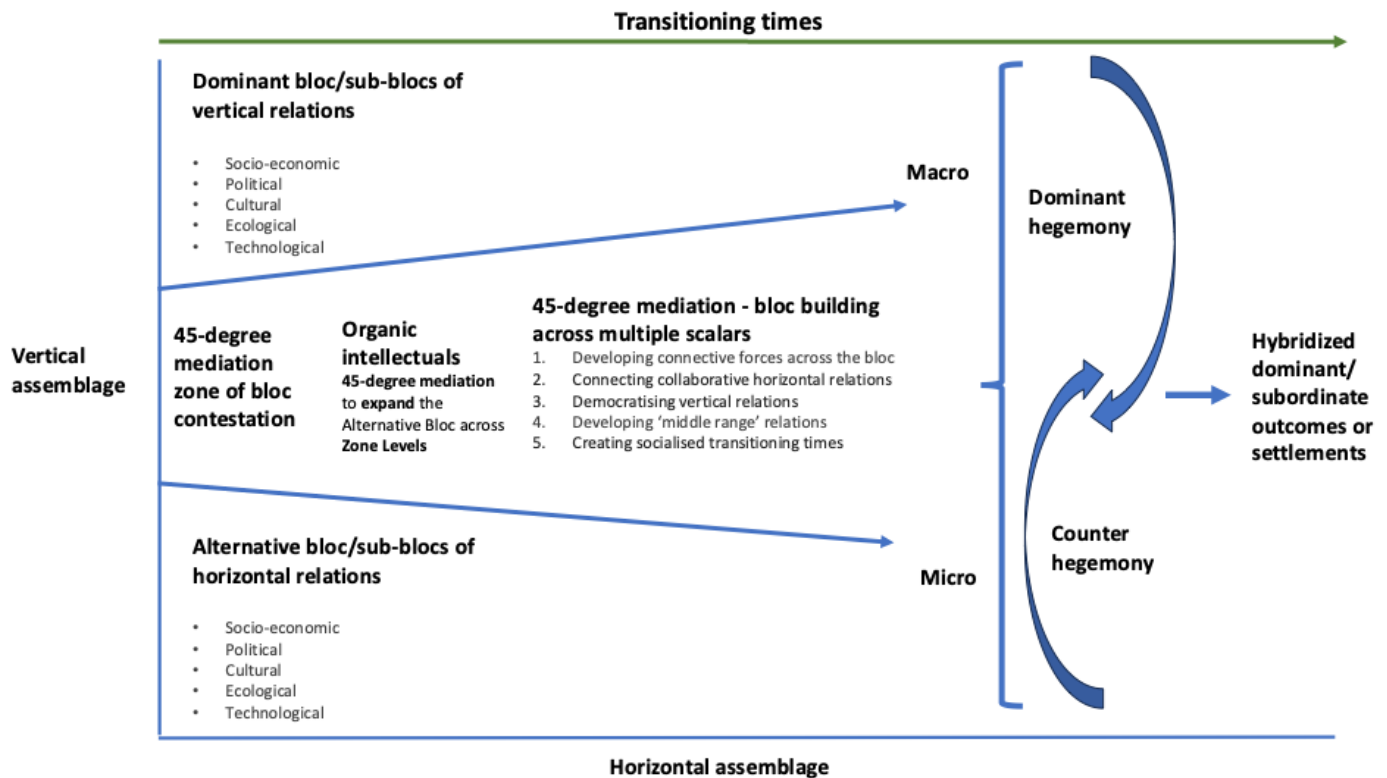
³ Peter Hall and David Soskice. 2001. in *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*, Oxford University Press, suggested the emergence of two types of capitalism – free market and co-ordinated. Since then, it is possible to see several different variants of co-ordinated capitalisms.

and activities, principally associated with the governmental state (national and international), thus representing the spine of the dominant historical bloc in support of capitalist hegemony ⁴. The horizontal assemblage, on the other hand, consists of multiple horizontally organised forces, factors and activities that are principally associated with civil society to support a counter-hegemony.

2. *The 45-degree zone of progressive mediation* – represents the points at which the two blocs – dominant and alternative - intertangle through terrains (macro to micro) of competition. From the perspective of the alternative bloc, the zone can contain a range of progressive forces, factors and activities organised synergistically (understood as strong mediation) to develop the horizontal assemblage and build progressive relationships with elements of the vertical assemblage. It is through these fusions that the alternative bloc expands.
3. *The clash of hegemonies and hybridised outcomes* – permanent competition between the blocs produces multiple types of outcomes – economic, social, political, cultural, technological and ecological. These are hybridised into dominant/subordinate types representing the balance of forces at any historical moment.
4. *Transitioning times* - represent a chrono-dimension to conceptualise the evolution of progressive 45-degree mediation through societal transitioning processes. Like the pluralisms of the other three dimensions, there are a multiplicity of transitioning times, some faster and others slower.

⁴ Panagiotis Sotiris, 2017. in 'The enduring relevance of the historical bloc for contemporary struggles', in Thompson, S. and Davies, R. (eds.) *Gramsci and the Global Present*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 145-168, argues that Gramsci's concept of historical bloc is not only an analytical a strategic concept. This is the interpretation of blocs in this paper.

Figure 2. 45-Degree Change Framework 2.0



Horizontal and vertical assemblages

Relationships between the assemblages

Both assemblages can be compared as historical blocs across multiple layers of relations, as illustrated in Figure 2. However, power imbalances between them reveal key distinctions in their relational dynamics. The vertical assemblage, deeply embedded in globalized capitalism and state power structures, exhibits strong national and transnational characteristics, shaped by centralized authority and institutional frameworks. In contrast, horizontal assemblages—while also engaging with national and transnational dimensions—are predominantly localized, emerging from grassroots networks and civil society initiatives.

Furthermore, reflecting the influence of hegemonic power, vertical assemblages often penetrate horizontal layers to shape relations of consent to ensuring alignment with dominant ideologies and structures. Conversely, there are instances when forces within horizontal assemblages challenge or

infiltrate the domains of the state, asserting alternative visions of governance and social organization. However, such interventions have been relatively scarce in recent decades, particularly within the context of pervasive neoliberal politics that have prioritized market-driven imperatives over collective action. Now far-right national populism, while presenting itself as insurgent and as a third force, serves neoliberal interests by taking aim at radical civil society in differing national contexts, presenting new challenges for progressive 45-degree mediation.

Viewing the assemblages as competing historical blocs helps understanding of how they interact to take on features of the opposite. The degree to which the vertical assemblage interacts with, and shapes horizontal terrains reflects the hegemonic ambitions of the regressive dominant bloc. Conversely, the ability of the radical horizontal assemblage not only to expand horizontal relations but also to reform the vertical world will depend on how far progressive economic, technological, political, social, and cultural factors have been combined to construct 21st-century counter hegemony.

Figure 3. The vertical and horizontal assemblages compared

The vertical assemblage	The horizontal assemblage
1. Dominant world economic order - neoliberal and coordinated state capitalisms - Transnational capitalist institutions (e.g. IMF and World Bank).	Alternative world economic order - socialised forms of capitalism (e.g. Nordic welfare model) - progressive international institutions, worker and social movements. - Social, economic experimentation
2. Class-based social relations	Social, community and class solidarities
3. Technological Platform Capitalism	Socialised digital technologies.
4. National governmental state, including co-located democratic institutions.	Radical civil society, including democratic co-located democratic local governance.
5. Regressive organic intellectuals and the shaping of 'neoliberal common sense'	Progressive organic intellectuals and the development of progressive 'good sense'.
6. Historical verticalities – institutions and cultures for restorations	Institutional and societal modernization

The horizontal assemblage

An understanding of assemblages as competing historical blocs is led by an analysis of the horizontal world because this is where the impulses for change lie. The horizontal assemblage is mainly equated with civil society (national and international) comprising an array of social relationships and organisations that stand outside of national government (e.g. NGOs, faith organisations, charitable organisations, family relations), that connect citizens in voluntary activity and play an important role in the way people lead their lives. It is also an area of network organisation rather than more formalised organisations, what Neal Lawson referred to as 'emergent structures'. These relatively 'autonomous' networked spaces can be seen as areas of civil society where counter-hegemonic ideas and practices are nurtured ⁵.

The horizontal world comprises a diverse array of economic, political, social, and ideological movements, campaigns and civil society innovations, primarily associated with civil society and the opposing historical bloc. Moreover, elements of the horizontal assemblage do not exist in a pure form but constantly intersect with the vertical, creating a complex fabric of hybridised of factors and forces affected by international and national contexts to produce either regressive or progressive outcomes. A major regressive development has been the fragmentation of radical civil society under economic, political and ideological pressures of decades of neoliberalism. While progressive developments have taken place in horizontal assemblages, including social protest movements and civil society innovations, co-located democratic organisation exhibits contradictory tendencies of centralisation/decentralisation. Parliamentary activity has been overshadowed by executive power emanating, for example, from the Prime Minister's Office and No 10, while local governance and the role of city regions have in recent years grown in strategic importance. This contradiction raises the question of how expanding 'middle-range' structures can support elements of radical civil society in support of building a progressive counter-hegemony, seen by Gramsci as 'war of position' ⁶.

The detailing and ordering of the elements of the horizontal assemblage vary across different national landscapes, reflecting unique historical, cultural, and political contexts. The following section describes and analyses those elements within the UK context, a brief assessment of their current condition and potential for co-ordination both laterally and by interaction with the vertical assemblage.

⁵ The idea of creating diffused sites of 'autonomy' for social transformation has been a key argument of the Italian autonomists (e.g. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, 2000. *Empire*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).

⁶ Antonio Gramsci, 1971 translation. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, New York: International Publishers, 238.

Civil society protest movements - such as Occupy, Me Too, Black Lives Matter and climate activism have been important sources of progressive ideas and energy over the past decade or so, acting as catalysts for substantial political and cultural changes. However, their impact often diminishes over time, raising the question of how they can evolve to have a more lasting influence on wider political life and how they can be supported by elements of the vertical assemblage. This part of the 'progressive dilemma' was the central theme of Change Model 1.0.

Worker movements and trade unions - have long served as the protective and strategic backbone of civil society, advocating for workers' rights and social justice. However, their influence has fluctuated historically with neoliberal policies having significantly weakened their traditional base over the past 50 years. To survive and remain relevant, worker organizations have had to adapt to changing economic and social landscapes, including the rise of new female leaderships, organizing new members like young and gig economy workers, fostering collective action across sectors and strengthening inclusive social dialogue⁷.

Emergent structures of civil society innovation – as Neal Lawson argued in 45-degree change 1.0, emergent new organisations play a pivotal role in driving social change. By utilising deep understandings of local and civil society contexts, organisational innovators can introduce novel approaches to social, economic, and environmental challenges to not only inspire change within communities but also influence broader policy discussions and practices, helping to bridge the gap between traditional institutions and the evolving needs of society.

Progressive organic intellectuals – producing progressive intellectual forces in civil society is challenging, particularly in the context of neoliberal incursions supported by right-wing media and well-funded conservative think tanks. In the UK, despite their relatively large numbers, progressive intellectuals are scattered and have a tenuous relationship with an insular Labour Party. The key question, therefore, is how to coordinate these intellectual forces and forge connections between radical civil society, lifelong learning, worker movements and progressive think tanks, media and political parties.

⁷ International Labour Organization, *Work for a Brighter Future: Report of the Global Commission on the Future of Work* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2019), 37–39.

AI and digital technologies – while underpinning Platform Capitalism, progressive technological trends are nevertheless emerging ⁸. Tech giants face regulatory challenges, like the EU's Digital Services Act (although they are being weakened within the US); progressive platforms like Bluesky and Threads prioritize privacy and decentralization, while search engines like Ecosia support environmental causes; open-access publications democratize knowledge; and Chinese large language like DeepSeek challenge US tech hegemony. Nevertheless, progressive socialised tech remains subordinate, thus raising the question not only how to control dominant tech, but how to utilize the emerging alternative technological universe to connect and innovate in reformed horizontal and vertical relations.

Social relations and collective identity within families and communities are foundational to civil society. Over recent decades, neoliberalism has fragmented these relations, while the far right now deepens divisions through culture wars and identity conflicts. The political Left thus faces the deep challenge of fostering a new kind of unity - inclusivity for marginalized groups while respecting traditional values and working-class solidarities that requires the building of bridges through shared values, addressing economic insecurities, and creating dialogue spaces that honour both diversity and community bonds.

Co-located horizontalities - local governance and civic anchor institutions - are essential for developing a horizontalist assemblage. Despite the weakening effects of austerity, local governance has been revitalized through economic investment and devolved powers and city-regional governance and mayoral leadership, exemplified by figures like Andy Burnham in Manchester, have introduced new dynamics for local leadership. Civic anchor institutions, such as universities and NHS Trusts, can also play a crucial role in supporting local identity and community life. Developing democratic and connective local and regional governance can be seen as 'building from the middle' to help bridge the gap between formal institutional governance and radical civil society action.

⁸ See for example, Laura DeNardis, 2020. *The Internet in Everything: Freedom and Security in a World with No Off Switch*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 115–117.

Connecting the bottom through a common narrative

The fragmentation of radical civil society constitutes the first part of the 'progressive dilemma'. Despite being a constant source of new ideas and innovative practices, radical civil society remains highly dislocated. The historical roots of the fragmentation lie in the absence of a leading and organising transformative ideology (e.g. the role that state socialism played in the first half of 20th Century), meaning that 21st Century radical civil society comprises diverse ideologies, including post-anthropogenic thinking, commitments to race and gender justice, anti-poverty and anti-imperialism thinking. Allied to this diversity are decentralized structures which makes co-ordinated action more difficult. And with ideological and organisational diversity comes the problems of small-scale and resource constraints. At the same time, movements for change will face repressive actions from the vertical assemblage with political authoritarianism being as prevalent under Starmer's Labour Government as with previous Conservative Administrations.

The key progressive task therefore must be 'connecting bottom' – creating alliances and relationships between the different strands of civil society- through the development of a common narrative and connective action. A prime candidate for the common narrative must be a 'peace-led Just Transition', encapsulating the convergence of three key ideas - the urgent movement to Net Zero, social justice for the most vulnerable and a peaceful environment – each of which focuses on what needs to be done. The coming together of the diverse forces of radical civil society could be understood as 'we are different, but we walk together'.

The vertical assemblage

The vertical assemblage includes socio-economic, political, cultural/ideological, technological and historical structural elements that function as dominant historical blocs both nationally and globally. An analysis of vertical relations therefore begins with two assumptions. First, existing vertical assemblages can be understood as the primary dimension of regressive historical blocs, and second, these bloc relationships will exhibit both coherence/alignment and incoherence/contradiction.

Varieties of capitalism - economic systems in classical Gramscian theory have been associated with civil society. However, capitalism in the 21st Century can be located mainly within the vertical assemblage

particularly, due to the influence of neoliberal capitalism and oligarchic economic elites that are integrated with political leading parties (e.g. Republicans in the US and Conservatives in the UK) and with the state, added to which are the co-ordinating roles of capitalist transnational organisations (e.g. IMF and World Bank). However, US-led neoliberal capitalism has been losing its dominance due to competition with state-led capitalisms, with the growing geopolitical split between the West and BRICS presaging a fundamental global economic and political realignment. Additionally, the surge of far-right national populism (particularly Trump 2.0) has further fragmented international relations. The transitioning from US hegemony to a more chaotic multipolar world and is, therefore, an important dimension of 45-Degree Change 2.0 analysis.

Technological Platform Capitalism - led by Big Tech companies of Silicon Valley (e.g. Amazon, Google, Apple, Facebook, X, Meta and other AI-related firms), Platform Capitalism represents a new and powerful element in the vertical assemblage⁹. But considerable controversy has accompanied its rise, with strident critiques, notably Shoshana Zuboff's 'Surveillance Capitalism'¹⁰ Yanis Varoufakis's 'Techno Feudalism', highlighting regressive implications of the new developments¹¹. Moreover, significant contestations are emerging propelled by geo-technological realignments, reflected most recently in the Chinese DeepSeek large language model open-source movement that has shaken the Western AI world¹².

Class-based social and economic relations – at the centre of vertical assemblages are social and economic relations dominated by nationally based and globally related capitalist classes that seek to utilise the political, cultural, and technological elements of the assemblages to consolidate their rule. However, the varieties of capitalism argument and the forms of platform capitalism observation suggest that the roles of the state and civil society are vital in determining how far the ruling economic, social class can fully control the elements or layers of the dominant bloc.

National governmental state – contains repressive apparatuses including the security services, army, police, the criminal justice system and state bureaucracies, representing hierarchical state power. At the

⁹ Nick Srnicek, 2016. *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹⁰ Shoshana Zuboff. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

¹¹ Yanis Varoufakis. 2024. *Techno-feudalism: What Killed Capitalism*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House.

¹² For a recent analysis of the impact of DeepSeek see, for example, Xinrui Zhao et al., 2025. "DeepSeek: Paradigm Shifts and Technical Evolution in Large AI Models," *Journal of Automation, Electrification, and Sensing* 12, no. 5, 1023–1035, <https://www.ieee-ias.net/en/article/doi/10.1109/JAS.2025.125495>.

same time, the 'national democratic political state'—encompassing parliament, political parties and regional and local governance — can be seen as *co-located* due to their relationship with political democracy and the local state, thus opening affordances for 45-degree progressive mediation.

Regressive organic intellectuals - in 21st century contexts these are diverse organising forces, including leading figures and representative bodies from Big Tech, finance, right-wing and nationalist populist media, state bureaucracies, and reactionary social media bloggers. However, traditional right intellectual influences have weakened since the 1990s due to economic crises and the rise of anti-capitalist, feminist, racial justice, and ecological movements, along with alternative progressive media. This shift has intensified populist ideological struggles, evident in national populist culture wars against 'woke' ideologies ¹³.

Historical verticalities – refer to traditional forces supporting conservatism and restorations, deeply entrenched in through historical institutions such as monarchies, established religions, the military, and state bureaucracies, prestigious universities and private schooling. In the Global North, these verticalities have a mainly ideological function to shape collective consciousness and perpetuate historical hierarchies. In the Global South, legacy verticalities are also exerted through post-colonial structures and the imposition of international aid and debt regimes. Historical verticalities prove difficult to change because of their cultural symbolism.

Co-located facilitating verticalities – some parts of vertical assemblages are more open to change than others with key points of contestation between the blocs to be found in democratic political life. In the UK context, general and local elections provide platforms for alternative policies to be proposed and implemented. Nevertheless, political actors in the dominant bloc will invariably try to restrict these democratic terrains either by manipulating the electoral system and/or centralising powers. Key tasks for the alternative bloc, therefore, are to expand democratic life and to devolve powers to create more localised control.

Hybridisations and bloc tensions - despite their evident powers, vertical assemblages invariably experience misalignments resulting from economic, political, and ideological contestation. A major

¹³ For an analysis of this regressive cultural backlash see – Hannah Jackson and Daniel Kreiss. "Anti-Woke Publics." *International Journal of Communication* 18 (2024): 5489–5509.

feature in misalignment is ‘hybridisation’ in which vertical assemblages take on features of the horizontal world. This can happen in regressive and progressive ways. Strategies of the dominant forces tend to focus on ‘passive revolution’ reforms to incorporate radical impulses from civil society to create a new, although compromised regressive settlement. On the other hand, democratic co-location can disrupt the dominant bloc and support the expansion of the more horizontally organised alternative bloc. However, the degree to which this happens will depend on legacies of previous bloc contestations and the outcomes of expanded democratic struggles (e.g. elections of progressive governments, political shifts within established political parties, and new participative and representative political structures). Bloc tensions also occur in the international arena, with transnational organisations such as the UN, WHO and other global agencies, becoming potential platforms for progressive change as a broader array of nations become involved.

Reforming the vertical assemblage through a democratic project

The concept of the vertical assemblage attempts to capture the complex nature of hierarchic power in 21st century contexts. Consisting of multiple socio-economic, political, cultural and technological relations, vertical assemblage can also be seen as forming increasingly dominant historical blocs national and global. In response, a key mission for progressive forces should be an expansive democratic project to create new political stabilities capable of systematically addressing the poly crisis. In the UK context, such a democratic project could prioritise several interlocking strands – PR voting reform (arguably the main catalyst); making Parliament more democratic by curbing the powers of the Executive, devolving powers to local and regional government; democratising the Labour Party and establishing citizens’ assemblies to deliberate on budget-making and key areas of controversy.

The 45-degree zone of mediation

Strong progressive 45-degree mediation

The concept of the '45-degree zone of mediation' comprises a range of terrains - economic, social, political, technological and cultural - on which opposing forces compete for hegemonic influence. Within this general definition, it is possible to make two distinctions— regressive/progressive and weak/strong.

The regressive/progressive couplet recognises that political mediation strategies are operated by both blocs. Regressive mediation is undertaken by organic intellectuals of the dominant bloc that, through processes of that includes passive revolution, attempt to restore equilibrium in the regressive bloc and reassert its hegemony. Conversely, progressive mediation can be seen as counter-hegemonic with the aim transitioning to new set of economic, ecological social, political, technological and cultural relations, or what Compass has referred to as a 'New Settlement' ¹⁴.

The strong/weak couplet conceptualises the degree of strength of progressive mediation. Much horizontal mediation activity remains weak - relatively isolated and unsupported by other mediation factors or activities in the co-located areas and thus constituting part of the progressive dilemma. Strong mediation, on the other hand, will necessarily involve the combining of multiple mediation activities and the final part explores how this might happen within the 45-degree zone of mediation across the four dimensions – building mediation capacities; expanding collaboration in the radical horizontal assemblage; democratising vertical assemblages; and creating progressive transitioning time (see Figure 4).

¹⁴ See Ken Spours and Neal Lawson. 2023. *The Ship and the Sea: The Framework for a New Settlement*. Compass: London, UK, and Sue Goss. 2024. *The New Settlement: For a Better Society*. London: Compass, 2024.

Figure 4. Strong progressive 45-degree mediation strategies to build a progressive bloc

1. *Unifying 45-degree progressive mediation capacities*

- fundamental social change principles - greater equality, democracy, sustainability and peace
- layers of connective mediation actors
- intellectual capacities – general intellect and connective specialisation

2. *Expanding collaboration in the radical horizontal assemblage*

- Building alliances around the fundamental principles
- linkages between radical civil society innovation, protest movements and local democracies

3. *Democratising the vertical assemblage and building from the middle*

- democratic 45-degree political parties
- an early focus on democratising the voting system as a catalyst for change
- developing participative democracies (e.g. citizens' assemblies)
- 'building from the middle' to develop local and regional governance
- utilising and developing connective socialised technologies.

4. *Creating progressive transitioning times*

- Concept of multiple transitioning times
- Unifying idea of a 'New Settlement' and 'hope for the future'

1. Developing unifying forces and activity to connect the horizontal and vertical

The intersections of the horizontal and vertical worlds do not happen naturally; they must be forged by transformative activity. Underpinning progressive bloc building are the foundational ideas of greater equality, democracy, sustainability and peace that help cohere the diverse forces civil society and the state. These post-capitalist missions are of a different magnitude to Labour's anaemic 'delivery missions' because they articulate the fundamental progressive values driving the expansive politics of 45-degree change.

The intricate social and scientific complexities and protracted poly crises of 21st-century societies require a diverse array of organic intellectuals (individual and collective), including teachers, researchers, producers, trade unionists, journalists, civil servants, politicians, workers in the tech sector and civil society

activists¹⁵; each applying ‘organic’ blends of shared political consciousness (associated with the horizontal work) and connective specialist knowledge and skill (associated with the vertical world) to the 45-degree mediation process¹⁶.

Neal Lawson in *45-Degree Change* summarised the dialectical relationship between horizontal general and vertical specialist forms of knowledge.

‘Transforming the world will require new knowledge from both the horizontal and vertical knowledge-worlds. The popular production of knowledge from innovative horizontal practices will be assisted by new forms of lateral digital communication and exchange, whereby citizens can find things out for themselves and exchange experiences, thereby becoming more specialist. But the knowledge world cannot simply be transformed from below; it also requires progressive forms of specialisation from technical experts who are prepared to serve a universal and progressive cause because their vertical knowledge is informed by a horizontal dimension’.

2. Expanding collaboration in the radical horizontal assemblage

Radical civil society refers to segments of civil society that seeks to challenge and transform existing social, political, and economic structures. A collaborative and trusted broker organisation like Compass, that already has established a Progressive Alliance idea, is in a prime position to address the fragmentations of the radical horizontal world. Connective activities could include - *mapping the Landscape* to identify key actors, issues, strategies, and existing connections or disconnections; working with others to *facilitate cross-movement dialogue to establish a shared language of systemic issues* (e.g., neoliberalism, climate crisis, democratic deficits); *building bridges between protest movements and civil society innovators* by, for example, demonstrating how the disruptive power of protest movements can complement the practical, localised solutions offered by small-scale civil society innovators; and developing *joint*

¹⁵ For an analysis of 21st century public or organic intellectuals see, for example, McKenzie Wark, 2017. *General Intellects - Twenty-One Thinkers for the 21st Century*. New York: Verso.

¹⁶ For the concept of the ‘organic intellect’ see Ken Spours, 2017. ‘From the ‘General’ to the ‘Organic’ Intellect: Reflections on the Concepts of Specialization and the Curriculum of the Future.’ In *Sociology, Curriculum Studies and Professional Knowledge*, edited by David Guile, David Lambert, and Michael Reiss, 202-218. London: Routledge.

campaigns around shared objectives in which the progressive alliance concept moves beyond electoral collaboration to building progressive alliances across civil society: and cementing collaboration by facilitating resource sharing (knowledge, skills, networks, even funding) between different groups.

3. Democratising the vertical assemblage and building from the middle

A central argument of 45-degree 1.0 is that radical civil society activity cannot be fully built and sustained without the help of a reformed vertical world. Creating a more facilitating vertical assemblage would be based on an extensive critique of its current condition - an overly centralised political system in England particularly, the restrictions of past-the-post electoral system, weakened local government, the dominance of established interests; all of which has led to an erosion of trust in political life.

Democratising the vertical assemblage will be a long journey that could realistically begin with political decentralisation that also includes experiments in local democratic innovations such as citizens' assemblies. However, the big blockage is the voting system in England, suggesting that PR electoral reform could become a prime catalyst in encouraging a more collaborative politics. At the same time, to ensure the vertical world better serves the public interest there must be enhanced accountability and transparency across the political state, including rules covering political donations and greater transparency concerning the influence of large donors. And deeper still will be the change of mindset around the idea of a 'facilitating state', marking a shift from state as power, to the idea of state as a culture of public service ¹⁷.

A key ingredient in the devolution mix is 'building from the middle' by *developing the fabric of middle range organisations* of local and regional governance that lies between the citizen and the national governmental state. Despite having been undermined by neoliberalism the expansion of local and regional governance is on the agenda. The democratic co-location of this vital intermediate layer gives them key mediating roles to translate national policy in local contexts, exercise devolved co-ordinating and service delivery while also nurturing local civil society. The unique qualities of democratic local and regional governance can be its sense of place and the mission to reflect the present and future needs of local populations, including economic and ecological coordination and the expansion of lifelong learning.

¹⁷ The idea of state as networked public service has a rich historical literature (e.g. Roderick Rhodes, .1997. *Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Governance, Reflexivity and Accountability*, Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press

Moreover, local governance can also be democratised, helping it to reach out to local civil society organisations and assist with popular participation, resourcing grassroots activities, boosting civic presence and collaborating to improve sustainable working, living, and learning ¹⁸.

Political parties are expected to lead in democratic societies, but a key question is their nature and relationship within the vertical and horizontal assemblages. Previous Compass publications have stressed the need for the modern political party to become less hierarchical and incorporate networked features of civil society ¹⁹. While going with the flow of this argument, the concept of 45-degree mediation calls for the political party to become a *45-degree organisation*, combining the discipline, strategic organisation and leadership of a progressive vertical world with horizontal reflexivity, involving acts of listening to and learning from radical civil society so that the political party can be renewed from below. In retrospect, this could be seen to be the core argument of a previous Compass publication on the 21st century political party '*The Very Modern Prince*' ²⁰.

Finally, utilising and developing connective socialised digital technologies can assist in the democratisation of the vertical assemblage. Public intellectuals in all parts of state and civil society now have new tools to assist with societal connectivity and innovation. Generative AI, despite its dangers, can augment and enhance human mediating thinking by assisting with understanding complex challenges in medicine, sustainable economic growth, climate change associated with 'Industry 5.0' ²¹. The key point about counter hegemony is that it should represent not only an alternative to dominant neoliberal thinking but also represent the cutting edge in 21st century innovation – social, economic, political, cultural and technological.

4. Socialising transitioning time

The 'time challenge' represents much-neglected thinking on the Left. For traditional socialists and Marxists in first half of the 20th Century, time largely took care of itself because of the belief that socialism would automatically follow the collapse of capitalism. And when that failed to happen, the world fell into

¹⁸ For an expansive concept of local governance see Patrick Diamond, 2020. 'The Importance of Place-Shaping.' *Local Government Information Unit*, June 10, 2020. <https://lgiu.org/the-importance-of-place-shaping>.

¹⁹ See for example. Compass. 2018. *21st Century Party: A Democratic Left Networked Party*. London: Compass.

²⁰ Ken Spours. 2016. *The Very Modern Prince: The 21st Century Political Party and Political Formation*. London: Compass.

²¹ For the relationship between generative AI and Industry 5.0 see - Rosário, Albérico Travassos, and Ricardo Jorge Gomes Raimundo. "AI, Optimization, and Human Dignity: Industry 5.0 Challenges Limits of Industry 4.0." *Devdiscourse*, June 30, 2025. <https://www.devdiscourse.com/article/technology/3485017-ai-optimization-and-human-dignity-industry-50-challenges-limits-of-industry-40>.

the thrall of neoliberal thinking that, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, suggested that humanity had reached ‘the end of history’ and that capitalist democracy was the best it could get ²². The cancelling of the historical process by the neoliberal time model served to freeze exploitative relations in what Christopher Pollitt referred to as the ‘expanded present’ ²³. However, the hubristic triumph of neoliberalism did not last long with the 2008 banking crisis setting the historical clock ticking again.

In the years since, the idea of ‘transitioning’ away from neoliberal capitalism can be seen to replace two mechanistic historical perspectives - the optimistic inevitability of socialism and the pessimistic of the end of history arguments. We may be increasingly clear about the need to find ways out of the poly crisis, but less clear about what we would like to transition to. In the 21st century absence of a dominant historical narrative (e.g. socialism) there are multiple forms of transitioning, each with its own timescale. For example, the urgency of transitioning from the climate/nature emergency in a decade or so can be contrasted with the idea of a patient rebuilding of fragmented community bonds in which social time is ‘slowed down’ to enjoy the present while acting for the future. Interestingly, the Compass concept of a ‘New Settlement’ of the ensemble of relations evolving beyond a single Parliament but achievable within a lifetime, could be seen as a way of unifying the differing strands of transitioning. In the final analysis, progressive and socialised approaches to time should aim to give back hope for the future in an era of widespread stasis and despair.

Creating 45-degree socio-political ecosystems – expanding the zone of mediation

Progressive mediation can be seen to be at its most advanced when multiple mediation activities are combined into a reciprocal dynamic to create and expand a ‘45-degree socio-political ecosystem’ across the four dimensions of the 2.0 Framework. Devolution of powers and collaborative activity are key political strategies in socio-political ecosystem creation.

- *The catalytic effects of the connective horizontal* – all ecosystems need catalysts to reinforce their dynamics, thus *connecting the horizontal* builds the foundations of radical civil society and the impulses for change. This connective stimulative is arguably the prime role for an alliance-based organisation like Compass.

²² Francis Fukuyama, 1989. “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, no. 16: 3–18. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184>

²³ Pollitt, Christopher. 2011. *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis*. Oxford University Press.

- *Democratising the vertical by political devolution* – devolving powers at all levels of society is a key ecosystem reforming activity. Interestingly, reforming the voting system can be seen as a form of devolution because it can empower voters to exercise choice, while devolving powers to middle range governance helps local/regional co-ordination and can open downward connections to the horizontal world.
- *Building 45-degree mediating forces* – creating more democratic 45-degree political parties, nurturing new layers of 21st century connective public intellectuals and democratised local governance can create new connective fabrics across society and globally. Added to these strong combined mediation activities are the possibilities arising from socialised digital technologies ²⁴.
- *Socialising time for transitioning*– the idea of socialised progressive time rescues hopes for the future from the stasis of the neoliberal expanded present. Progressive time is not provided by the hidden hand of history, but by creative 45-degree mediating activity for transitioning to fairer, more sustainable, democratic and peaceful futures or what Compass has referred to as a New Settlement.

The combined effects of - connecting the horizontal, democratising the vertical, building from the local/regional middle and socialising time – can be seen to expand the 45-degree zone of mediation by supporting the building of the progressive historical bloc as illustrated in Figure 2.

And finally, the 45-Degree Change Framework 2.0 attempts to provide a comprehensive conceptual toolkit for understanding and driving progressive systemic change by integrating insights from neo-Gramscian theory and social ecosystem theory and contemporary to navigate the interconnected crises of the 21st century. The key challenge now is to test and apply the 2.0 Framework in various geo-political contexts - the West, East and Global South - to help develop its conceptual capacities as a guide to progressive bloc building and societal transitioning.

²⁴ The idea of socialised technologies assisting with progressive mediation is explored by Helena Puig Larrauri. 2024. “Mediating with and on Technology.” In *Still Time to Talk: Adaptation and Innovation in Peace Mediation*, edited by Teresa Whitfield, Accord Issue 30. London: Conciliation Resources.

Annex – comparison of key features of Model 1.0 and Framework 2.0

Concept/Dimension	45-Degree Change Model 1.0	45-Degree Change Framework 2.0
Core idea and function	Dynamic change model suggesting a transformative politics through a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches, represented by a '45-degree fault line of change'.	Expanded framework, including vertical and horizontal assemblages, 45-degree zones of mediation, and a chrono-dimension of transitioning times to provide a comprehensive conceptual toolkit to guide transformative activity. The four dimensions relate to and help develop the Gramscian concept of historical bloc.
Vertical axis of governmental state	Formal structures of power, governance, and hierarchy to be reformed to support radical civil society.	Multi-layered hierarchical assemblage of forces, factors, and activities located across national and transnational scales that function as dominant historical bloc to support regressive hegemony.
Horizontal axis of civil society	Civil society, grassroots movements, networks, and informal organizations to provide political energy and innovation.	Multi-layered horizontal assemblage of forces, factors and activities located across local, national and international civil societies that function as an opposing historical bloc to support a potential progressive counter-hegemony.
45-degree fault line	Intersection points between horizontal and vertical political worlds, representing potential synergies for progressive change.	Expanded into the 45° zone of progressive mediation – a dynamic and multi-level space for intense mediation activity and contestation between opposing blocs.
Temporal dimension	Not explicitly addressed.	A chrono-system of 'transitioning times' to assist strategic thinking about the 'Just Transition' and step-by-step movements towards a 'New Settlement'.
Technological change	Recognition of the potential for digital technologies to facilitate new forms of solidarity and agency.	A critique of verticalities of platform capitalism and the potential for alternative tech universes to support progressive change.
Cultural and ideological power	Focus on the need for a new cultural narrative that supports collaborative action and collective control.	Expanded to include the roles of regressive organic intellectuals in shaping and the dominant and subordinate historical blocs.
Global context	Focus on the UK context, with some references to global trends.	Expanded to include a global perspective, incorporating the Global South and addressing global poly crises.