

NATIONAL POPULISM & THE POLITICAL THREE-BODY PROBLEM



**Regressive chaos and progressive
stability in 21st Century politics**

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About the author

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About this report

This report seeks to make sense of the complex moment we find ourselves in. Against the backdrop of the poly-crisis of climate, economy, tech and geo-politics, there is an inevitable resultant crisis of politics. Both traditional right and left are struggling to create order and security, as new right populism makes chaotic headway here in the UK, across Europe and in the USA. Ken Spours uses invaluable Gramscian analysis to understand the moment and look at how combinational or alliance-based forms of politics can help progressives navigate a way through to a Good Society.

This report is part of our New Settlement project which looks to establish both a feasible and desirable vision of a Good Society (see [The New Settlement: For a Better Society](#) by Sue Goss) and discern how we get there (see [The Ship and the Sea: The Framework for a New Settlement](#) by Ken Spours and Neal Lawson).

About Compass

Compass is the pressure group for a Good Society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build alliances of ideas, parties and movements to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support, and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link these up with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resource and policy we call 45 Degree Change.

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Summary

This Compass report delves into the global spread of national populism, including the rise of Reform UK, by examining the intricate relationship between the twin crises of neoliberalism and left politics—encompassing social democratic and socialist parties—and the concurrent surge of far-right movements. The dynamic interplay among these three forces is metaphorically likened to the ‘three-body problem’ from Cixin Liu’s acclaimed sci-fi trilogy, which illustrates the chaotic and unpredictable orbital mechanics of three suns influencing a distant planet. This metaphor is enriched by drawing on Gramscian concepts of ‘third force politics’, where an emergent political force gains traction as an alternative to the perceived failures of the two dominant forces, and ‘Caesarism’, a political ideology characterised by a single leader’s quest for absolute power. Together, the metaphor and the neo-Gramscian analysis provide a nuanced understanding of how the fragmentation of traditional political paradigms creates fertile ground for the rise of national populism, reshaping the global political landscape.

The dynamic and unstable relationship between the crises of neoliberalism, the weaknesses of social democracy and the new European Left, and the insurgent rise of national populism is termed the ‘political three-body problem’, powerfully encapsulated in Antonio Gramsci’s famous dictum:

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”¹

Originally coined to describe the crisis of Italian politics following World War I, which led to the rise of Mussolini and Italian fascism, Gramsci’s observation has proven to be timeless. It captures the essence of transitional periods in history, where the established order is in decline, yet the emerging paradigm remains too weak to fully take its place. This vacuum creates a state of chaos and disruption, allowing for the proliferation of what Gramsci termed “morbid symptoms”—political, social, and cultural phenomena that arise in the absence of a stable hegemony.

In the context of the global crisis of neoliberalism and left politics, this report is organised into five parts. The first introduces the concept of the ‘political three-body problem’ as the earthly political equivalent of the chaotic celestial problem. The second and third delve into the political body problems of the crisis of neoliberalism and the continuing weaknesses of the European Left, which fuel the rise of the political third force. The following part addresses the third political body problem – the insurgence of 21st-century national populism and its manifestations in the politics of Trump-Musk in the US and Farage in the UK. Here it is argued that national populism, as represented by

Trump 2.0, appears to be entering a new aggressive phase marked by alliances with regressive Big Tech, internal power grabs and the US international expansionist agenda. The fifth part, while recognising that the celestial three-body problem avoids mathematical solution, argues that its political equivalent can be solved through the development of a new progressive hegemony of revitalised social democracy and socialism, aided by green politics. The solution to the political three-body problem, seen through the Gramscian lens of hegemonic relations, is the creation of sufficient 'gravitational pull' of a progressive hegemony to replace 'regressive chaos' with 'progressive stability'.

The final section also argues that while it is essential to resist national populism, it is equally important to learn from its appeal to the working class. This does not mean uncritically adopting its regressive politics but rather understanding how to craft an alternative appeal that resonates with people's lived experiences, rather than focusing solely on how we might wish those experiences to be. This exercise in 'political learning' leads to the conclusion that a progressive alternative must navigate the 'change dilemma' – advocating for fundamental transformation while simultaneously offering the prospect of stable and meaningful lives.

The Political Three-Body Problem

Crises of neoliberalism and weaknesses of the European left feed regressive third force politics

The election of Donald Trump as US president for the second time provides strong evidence that the global resurgence of national populism continues apace, reflecting deeper structural changes in contemporary politics.²

Understanding the resurgence of the far right requires an examination of poly-crisis - the intersection of multiple global challenges across ecological, economic, political, ideological, and demographic domains.

These interconnecting crises have eroded public confidence in established political institutions, largely due to their perceived inability to address immediate challenges of declining living standards and disruptions to traditional social patterns. The polarised discourse prevalent in mass social media platforms has amplified and distorted popular concerns, both real and perceived.³ The digital 'echo chamber' effect has contributed to growing support for authoritarian leaders and their political movements, as sections of society embrace simplistic solutions to complex systemic problems.

National populism and political authoritarianism have established significant footholds in diverse political contexts, manifesting in the authoritarian leaders and governing parties of Viktor Orbán - Hungary, Javier Milei - Argentina, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan - Turkey, Narendra Modi - India, Benjamin Netanyahu - Israel, and Giorgia Meloni - Italy, while gaining substantial influence through populist opposition movements in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden and Austria.⁴ These developments represent a broader shift in political landscapes, as populist movements transition from marginal positions to central roles in national discourse and governance.

The United Kingdom has experienced a parallel evolution, marked by the rise of English nationalism that culminated in Brexit. This shift has been sustained through the continued political and cultural influence of figures like Nigel Farage, whose current political vehicle, Reform UK, maintains growing pressure on the mainstream parties. The transformation of the Conservative Party further exemplifies this trend, initially through Boris Johnson's premiership and subsequently with the election of Kemi Badenoch as party leader, whose alignment with Donald Trump's politics signals a deeper rightward shift in British Conservatism.

What follows is an exploration of the complex interrelationship between three political forces - dominant neoliberalism and its chronic crises; the continued weaknesses of subordinate left forces (social democracy

and the European socialist Left); and 21st-century national populism as regressive third force politics. The interaction between these three forces creates what is termed the 'political three-body problem' (PTBP).

The primary PTBP centres on the persistent structural crisis and evolution of dominant neoliberalism and the 'liberal international order' (LIO).⁵ The second manifests in the persistent electoral decline of left-wing political movements, particularly European Social Democracy, which has failed to capitalise on public discontent with neoliberalism's crisis and electoral failures elsewhere on the European Left, notably Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. This broader pattern of centre-left decline extends to major established social democratic parties. The third PTBP concerns the global rise of national populism that is fed by the crises of the first two.

Neo-Gramscian theory meets Chinese science fiction

The analysis of twin crises and the rise of third force politics employs a metaphorical device, drawing parallels between these political dynamics and the chaotic orbital mechanics of three suns in the Alpha Centauri star system, affecting the stability of the imagined planet Trisolaris. This cosmological metaphor, inspired by the Chinese sci-fi novel 'The Three-Body Problem' by Cixin Liu, has gained cult status through its adaptations into Chinese and Netflix TV series.⁶ Setting aside the broader narrative about the alien Trisolarian 400-year journey to Earth to escape the three-body problem, the central theme of the first volume explores the relationship between eras of chaos and stability. This allegorical work begins against the backdrop of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and its aftermath, reflecting on the interplay between chaos and predictability.

The three-body metaphorical device is linked to two Gramscian concepts - Caesarism/Third Force Politics and Hegemony/Counter-Hegemony - applied to the 21st-century contexts. The initial analysis draws on Gramsci's interpretation of Caesarism, which he used to understand the rise of Italian fascism and the role of Benito Mussolini. In Western political literature, Caesarism principally refers to the nature of dictatorship versus democracy.⁷

*Gramsci, however, delved deeper into political authoritarianism, exploring the dual crisis of opposing historical blocs - the endangered hegemony of the dominant bloc and the political immaturity of the subordinate bloc.*⁸

He emphasised the need to analyse concrete situations to identify variations in third force politics – the distinction between regressive and progressive Caesarism, differing gradations of Caesarism, and historical-political situations where either a heroic personality plays a

fundamental role or Caesarist solutions emerge without a prominent figure. Regardless of its form, leading figures of the political third force tend to be viewed differently to mainstream politicians, bypassing traditional political institutions to engage directly with various social groups. Here, the Gramscian concept of Caesarism/third force has been applied to 21st-century scenarios through an analysis of the roles of 'anti-politicians' such as Donald Trump in the US and Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage in the UK.

The combination of the cosmological metaphor with the concepts of Caesarism, third force politics, and regressive/progressive hegemonies is used to analyse the complexities of the current conjuncture, the combination of things happening at this moment that cause disruption. It is argued that political three-body dynamics will continue to produce regressive chaos unless one of the bodies—a transformed social democratic, socialist, and green left—can build a progressive hegemony to assert sufficient political and ideological 'mass' and 'gravitational pull' over the other two, an argument elaborated in the final part.

Political Body Problem No.1 - Neoliberalism, Crises and Evolution

At its core, neoliberalism is a political and economic ideology that emphasises the primacy of the market as the central mechanism for organising society, accompanied by a reduction in the role and functions of the state. Historically rooted in the works of Adam Smith, contemporary neoliberal thought has been significantly shaped by the free-market fundamentalism of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman.

Initially unpopular during the post-war era, dominated by Keynesian economic policies, the intellectual efforts of Hayek and Friedman eventually gained recognition, through the influential Chicago School of Economics,⁹ and their translation into transformative political and economic strategies by the governments of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom during the 1980s. Fundamentalist free market thinking and strategy gave rise to 'Anglo-Saxon' capitalism which, in the 1990s and early 2000s, became a global orthodoxy, cementing the formation of what has been referred to as the 'Liberal International Order'.¹⁰

Just as the Anglo-Saxon model appeared to have triumphed in the early 1990s, significant economic and production shifts were occurring beneath the political surface. The success of globalised capitalism was, paradoxically, sowing the seeds of long-term Western decline as the leading edges of technology and production moved first to Japan in the 1980s, and then subsequently to China and Southeast Asia.¹¹ Less than two decades after the proclaimed neoliberal victory in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the international banking crisis of 2008 ushered in a period of economic, social, political, and ecological turbulence that has since evolved into a global poly-crisis.

However, not all advanced economies suffered equally; it was the marketised and financialised Anglo-Saxon capitalism of the US and UK that proved most vulnerable. Neoliberal capitalism not only migrated industrially during a period of growing globalisation but also deepened inequalities both within neoliberal societies and between advanced economies and countries of the Global South, adversely affecting health and quality of life.¹² In recent decades, wealth disparities have exploded, marked by the expansion of a billionaire plutocracy while simultaneously impoverishing social classes and entire nations. Compounding this issue is the growing and insidious alliance between financial capital and Big Tech, which now wields unparalleled technological, political, and ideological influence.¹³ The neoliberal world of a few winners and many losers has also become a major contributor to the climate and nature emergency that, amongst its many disruptions, fuels mass migrations on which national populism feeds through a politics of fear.

History often reveals moments when dominant socio-economic

paradigms no longer advance human progress. Neoliberalism crossed this threshold approximately two decades ago and today, rather than offering viable solutions, it exacerbates the global poly-crisis. The crisis of neoliberalism lies in its evolutionary path, in which its constant reinvention makes matters materially, politically, and ecologically worse for humanity.¹⁴

Despite growing public disillusionment with neoliberalism, left parties in Europe and North America, and social democracy in particular, have failed to channel widespread discontent into a viable alternative vision, largely because they became complicit in the establishment of neoliberal hegemony.

Attention now turns to their role in the political three-body problem.

Political Body Problem No.2 - Weaknesses of the European Left

The crisis of social democracy – context and content

Divided traditions - The 20th-century Left evolved along two distinct trajectories: the social democratic movement, emerging from the Second International's reformist tradition, and the socialist-communist parties, rooted in Leninist thought and the Third International.¹⁵ The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 fundamentally altered this balance, dramatically weakening communist and socialist parties and establishing social democracy as the predominant left of centre electoral force across Western and Northern Europe. This part begins with a review of the problems of European social democracy, followed with an analysis of the travails of the socialist and green left.

Deindustrialisation and the social base - Social democracy reached its zenith in the 1970s, buoyed by three decades of Keynesian economic management, strong trade union movements, expanding welfare states and broad public support for collective economic solutions. The subsequent weakening of social democracy in the decades since can be analysed through two related dimensions - 'contextual factors' associated with globalisation and 'political factors' focusing on difficulties in articulating a coherent alternative to neoliberalism.¹⁶ Deindustrialisation, a macro factor that affected Western European economies to varying degrees, significantly eroded the industrial working class base of social democratic parties.¹⁷ The growing influence of neoliberal-inspired financialisation and technological change eventually spread globally, heralding structural changes that had profound political consequences in the form of a new type of conservatism — previously described as neoliberal and Anglo-Saxon.

Reconciliation with neoliberalism and the political costs of centrism - The erosion of social democratic possibilities in late twentieth-century Europe manifested most prominently in these parties' strategic accommodation of neoliberalism. This reconciliation, driven by a perceived need to capture the political centre, marked a decisive shift in social democratic politics. This was exemplified by the UK Labour Party's transformation under Tony Blair that fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between social democracy and market capitalism.¹⁸ The contradiction inherent in this approach proved particularly costly following the 2008 crisis. Despite the crisis originating in the banking sector, social democratic parties found themselves politically vulnerable to accusations of fiscal mismanagement and their subsequent failure to mount an effective opposition to austerity policies of the right further alienated their traditional working class base.¹⁹

Poor political and ideological story-telling – Social democracy has

particularly struggled with effective storytelling and narrative creation compared to the right. This issue is intertwined with other aspects of its crisis. Historical compromises with neoliberalism have led to a confusing and contradictory discourse, weakening its ability to challenge new conservative ideologies. Additionally, the evolving economic and social landscape has fragmented the left's traditional coalition, complicating the creation of a unified message that resonates both with diverse groups and what remains of the working class.²⁰

Moreover, when in government, social democracy has been accused of being part of the establishment and has found it difficult to maintain an 'insurgent' stance to mobilise support with a simple, radical and compelling vision.²¹ These difficulties have also applied to international (notably the corrosive position of social democracy related to the Gaza conflict) as well as domestic politics.

Given the mainstream media's typical opposition to social democratic and progressive views, the left must excel in communication. Unfortunately, this has all too often been its prime ideological failure.

The case of Starmerism – already failing? – An extensive analysis of the current Labour Government is not in scope here. However, thus far, Starmerism does not appear to be sufficiently able to confront Faragism. Early compromises with the City and financial markets have constrained expected action on public services, and there is an absence of a viable political narrative.²² Together with the near extinction crisis of the Conservatives under Badenoch, the political door has been left open to UK third force national populism.

Limitations of the new European Left - The systemic failures of the British Labour Party have been matched by the evident limitations of a new European Left in the shape of Podemos (Spain) and Syriza (Greece), and the European greens, to make any sustained political breakthrough. Their problems are to be found less in compromises with neoliberalism and more in failed attempts to promote radical politics in crisis-ridden neoliberal political environments.

The European Left faces common challenges in transitioning from protest movements to governing forces. These include negotiating the economic legacies of failing neoliberal policies, bridging gaps between committed supporters and the wider electorate, leadership splits, and predictable missteps under pressure. From a hegemonic perspective, these difficulties mainly stem from insufficient alliance-building before electoral success. This lack of hegemonic capacity is exacerbated by the shrinking political space, marked by social democracy's shift towards centrism, internal splits on how to respond, and the rise of the populist right, which more easily portrays itself as anti-system problems,

While the crisis of neoliberalism refers to the inability to solve systemic

problems, the crises of the European Left pertain more to the difficulties of successfully contesting political and ideological terrains.

The economic failures of neoliberalism, combined with the political failures of social democracy and the socialist left, have fuelled the rise of the third forces of national populism and neo-fascism. It is into this political 'Dark Forest' that we now enter.²⁴

Political Body Problem No.3 - National Populism with Neo-Fascist Characteristics

What's in a name?

Several terms have been used to describe the regressive third force in politics, including 'far right', 'right populist', 'national populist', and 'neo-fascist'. Defining the most appropriate term for this highly disruptive phenomenon is important if it is to be fully understood.

The term 'far right' is comparative, suggesting that this third force is more extreme than other right-wing politics, but does not capture its key characteristics. Jon Bloomfield and David Edgar use the term 'populist right' in their recent publication, *The Little Black Book of the Populist Right*, although they also refer to it as 'national populism'. They argue that this movement, characterised by charismatic leaders and a focus on nationalism, has managed to attract a diverse coalition of voters who feel abandoned by traditional political parties. At the same time, they caution against using the term 'fascism' too broadly, as it risks losing its historical context.²⁵

David Seymour, in his book *Disaster Nationalism*, arrives at a similar conclusion through a complementary argument. He suggests that while disaster nationalism is not the same as historical fascism, it creates an environment where inchoate fascist forces can thrive. He sees 21st-century disaster nationalism as possibly being in the early days of neo-fascism, which he appropriately terms 'not yet fascism'.²⁶

Enzo Traverso, in his book *The New Faces of Fascism*, explores the resurgence of nationalist and fascist-type movements in the 21st century. He argues that we are now confronted with 'post-fascist' movements, which differ from classical fascism and neofascism, in that they lack the cult of the state and have emerged in a context characterised by neoliberalism and the European Union.²⁷

Given that fascism is always an evolving phenomenon, the most accurate terminology for the regressive third force could be 'national populism with neo-fascist characteristics' as we try to understand not only its current condition, but possible future trajectories.

Neo-Gramscian reflections on national populism

National populism of the 21st-century, while variable from country-to-country, comprises a 'double shuffle' mix of dominant and subordinate characteristics in that it takes steps forward and back. The dominant elements include free-market adherence combined with nationalism, racism, misogyny, anti-democratic, anti-ecological politics and now a new kind of American imperialism. These shape its policies when campaigning to enter government and act as a guide to the overall

political discourse in government. The subordinate elements – notably anti-elite rhetoric and left-sounding economic promises – are intended to reach out to sections of the electorate but could end as deception and betrayal.

Glossary of key neo-Gramscian terms

What follows is a brief analysis of these features of national populism by developing four neo-Gramscian concepts – ‘regressive double shuffle politics’, ‘Caesarism and third force politics’, ‘the national populist historical bloc’, and ‘catastrophic’ and ‘corrosive’ equilibria of chaos. These key concepts are introduced in a brief glossary below before being applied to the politics of Trump and Farage.

- 1. Regressive double shuffle** – Stuart Hall, reflecting on the complexities of New Labour and its 'double shuffle' politics, argued that New Labour's politics combined a dominant discourse of adaptive neoliberalism to organise its political discourse with the subordinate element of mild social democracy to appeal to Labour's core supporters.²⁸ This case-study analysis of dominant/subordinate political relations can be applied as a more general political theory to understand how forces – regressive and progressive – can use differing versions of ‘combinational politics’ to organise transformations while keeping their alliances together. A key question of the ‘regressive double shuffle’ is whether the subordinate promises of improved economic conditions for the working classes inevitably result in betrayal.
- 2. Graduated Caesarism and third force politics** – Gramsci's concept of Caesarism was a reflection on the role of Mussolini as a figurehead who rose above the traditional forces of right and left to ‘arbitrate’ over the equilibrium of twin failures – crisis ridden liberal democracy and the failed European proletarian revolutions following WW1. Gramsci's concept of ‘graduated Caesarism’ provides a more nuanced understanding of political third force dynamics.

The third force strong leader or ‘Caesar’ is not always equidistant between the two traditional forces; they can lean towards either the dominant historical bloc (the ruling class and its allies) or the subordinate historical bloc (the working class and its allies), depending on the balance of power and the specific historical context.²⁹ The question here is how Trump or Farage link with the material interests of neoliberalism in their respective national contexts

- 3. Historical bloc** – At its simplest, Gramsci's concept of a historical bloc refers to the assemblages of the economic substructure and the political and ideological superstructures developed by the dominant or subordinate force to exercise political and ideological

hegemony (combinations of consent and coercion).³⁰ Historical blocs can be regressive by being aligned with, for example, neoliberalism, or progressive, insofar as they represent forces intent on creating a social new order. To be effective, the levels of the historical bloc do not need to be entirely harmonious; their relationship should simply exercise greater political reach than the opposition.

- 4. Catastrophic and corrosive equilibria** – Gramsci's concept of equilibria, in which the established and emergent forces find themselves in a condition of stalemate, is fundamental to his idea of third force politics whose function is to break the equilibrium in favour of one side or the other. His historical case focused on the considerable social, political, and economic turmoil of post-WW1 Italy where the established social order was in deep crisis, but the new order had yet to emerge to replace it. In the case of neoliberalism, the equilibria are less about a state of collapse of established forces, but their inability to resolve real world problems. In this sense, the equilibrium is less catastrophic and more corrosive.

The case of Trumpism and US national populism

The powers of national populism are to be found in the form of the charismatic leader who appears to be anti-political and anti-establishment; a politics of grievance that, while deeply attached to neoliberalism, portrays itself as insurgent; a set of alliances that while highly dependent on oligarchs is ideologically rooted in a disaffected working class; and with a politics of disruption and chaos that appeals to the disenchanted and the cynical. However, behind these surface characteristics lies a powerful combinational political economy that, while containing many contradictions, has exposed the one-dimensional politics of much of the left.

Combinational politics as a 'regressive double shuffle' - Trump's combinational politics reinforce existing inequalities while harking back to an era of white male domination. The key characteristics of national populism, fused with executive political power and the material interests of the ultra-rich, play an organising role in Trump's national populism. The dominant elements supporting the 'power-wealth nexus' are accompanied by several 'subordinate' elements aimed at increasing Trump's political appeal and solidifying the national populist historical bloc. These include political rhetoric against so-called cultural elites (culture wars) and promises to improve the living standards of the average American through relaxed state regulations, trade protectionism, and anti-immigration policies. In reality, the richest benefit the most.

Trumpism as US Caesarism and third force politics – The key characteristic of Trumpism as third force politics in the US context is that Trump (the American Caesar) and MAGA (his Praetorian Guard)

characteristic of Trumpism as third force politics in the US context is that Trump (the American Caesar) and MAGA (his Praetorian Guard) are the 'third forces' that have taken over the Republican Party. This could be seen as a hybridised third force politics. The preceding double shuffle analysis shows that Trumpism has a close relationship with sections of the neoliberal bloc, but not all of it. Evidence of this autonomy-close alignment relationship can be found in Trump's initial selection of cabinet members, prioritising loyalty and the ability to disrupt, evoking the image of a 'kakistocracy'—a government run by the least qualified and most unscrupulous citizens.³¹

The US national populist historical bloc - The almost circus-like nature of Trump's political campaign should not obscure the fact that he has assembled a formidable political bloc for electoral victories. His economic base includes a virtually unbelievable relationship between sections of the working class, who have felt left behind by globalisation and economic changes, and rich tech oligarchs such as Elon Musk.

The keys to this contradictory assemblage are to be found in both economics and politics. The hegemonic characteristics of Trumpism are related to not only its innate strengths, but also the weaknesses of the Democrats. It has become clear since November 2024 that, despite real achievements in terms of green investment and job creation, Biden and the Democrats still 'lost the working class' economically because advances failed to reach critical parts of the electorate and were not perceived to reverse the historical economic decline of blue-collar workers.³² These shortcomings were compounded by the effects from the inflationary spike resulting from the COVID pandemic on 'kitchen table economics',³³ leaving crucial sections of the electorate feeling worse off under a Biden/Harris presidency.

But economics was by no means the full story. A crucial role was played by ideology and politics. Trump's rhetoric and policies, appealing to cultural conservatism and nationalism, have helped unify diverse groups within his coalition, from rural voters to suburban conservatives, and even young males in Black and Hispanic populations.³⁴

While the charismatic leader was crucial, he was not the only actor. Gramsci emphasised the role of 'organic intellectuals' who emerge from within the social group to articulate its interests and values. Figures within Trump's movement, such as media personalities and political commentators, played a crucial role in shaping and spreading the coalition's ideology, including Charlie Kirk, founder of Turning Point USA, and Joe Rogan who, while not exclusively a Trump supporter, featured many pro-Trump voices on his podcast, significantly impacting public discourse.³⁵ While the Democrats raised more money and had endorsements from famous celebrities, they assembled a narrower electoral coalition and historical bloc than the Republicans. This is principally why they lost.

featured many pro-Trump voices on his podcast, significantly impacting public discourse.³⁵ While the Democrats raised more money and had endorsements from famous celebrities, they assembled a narrower electoral coalition and historical bloc than the Republicans. This is principally why they lost.

Since Trump's inauguration, the US national populist bloc has developed new contours, notably in an alliance with Big Tech as its leading figures have bent their knee before the 'imperial president'.³⁶ Given that Big Tech contains the largest companies in the US if not in the World, this new alignment is of consequence. Interestingly, Trump appears more interested in cryptocurrency than genuine technological innovation. This is just one of the many contradictions in the new national populist-tech formation that may unravel in the coming years.

Equilibria of chaos - Social and economic contradictions eventually surface on the terrain of politics. Under a Trump presidency, the term 'equilibria of chaos' aptly describes the anticipated turbulent political landscape as contradictory relations within the national populist historical bloc unravel. Already, the second coming of Trump promises to be more extreme than the first. With controversial figures like Marco Rubio, Pete Hegseth, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in key Cabinet positions, the administration will be marked by a blend of polarising policies and unpredictable governance. This will lead to an equilibrium of continuous flux marked by the constant interplay of conflicting forces, ideologies, and interests, with Trump positioning himself as the mediator. We are about to experience a political zoo. And there is the new phenomenon of the role of Elon Musk, who appears to have veered to a far-right position exemplified by his support for the UK's Tommy Robinson and the German AfD.

As of February 2025, Trump 2.0 is emerging as far more aggressive than Trump 1.0 – the Trump-Musk axis is concentrating internal power in ways that look dictatorial, and what passes as foreign policy appears as 'the new US imperium', marked by aggressions against bordering countries, the wild talk of acquiring Greenland, and now the idea of occupying Gaza to turn it into a piece of Trump real estate. Little or any of this is workable, but as Martin Kettle points out, that's to miss the point.³⁷ The takeaway is that Trump sounds like a strong man in action and this effective attention-seeking serves his purposes for now.

The ensuing chaos, therefore, may initially prove popular with a significant portion of the American electorate. Attempts at mass expulsion of undocumented migrants, a trade war with China, and tax cuts may garner support as Trump is seen to be fulfilling his promises and sweeping away the political establishment.

Yet, this deliberate chaos will prove unsustainable. The cruelty of mass expulsions will face popular resistance; mass deportations will

devastate the workforce in particular industries and raise prices; China will not back down in a trade war; tax cuts for the rich will inflate the US deficit while increasing inequalities; and expenditure cuts will hurt the very constituencies who voted for Trump. Internationally, the US may end up isolated on the world stage as it drives its previous allies into the arms of its supposed adversaries.

In essence, the US national populist playbook fosters international instability, political conflict, national division, and continued economic decline. However, the extent and pace at which the Trump project faces its contradictions will largely depend on the Democrats' political capabilities, especially in the context of mid-term elections.

Turning to the UK, the politics of Farage and Trump share several similarities, both being characterised by their populist rhetoric, anti-establishment stances, appeals to nationalism, culture wars and opposition to Net Zero. Farage's role in the Brexit movement mirrors Trump's 'America First' agenda, emphasising a return to national control and scepticism of international institutions.

On the other hand, Reform represents a purer form of third force politics, operating as an independent party while being closely aligned with the Conservative Right. Both variants of national populism are on the rise and evolving.

To preserve democracy and foster fair and sustainable futures, reversing this regressive tide will be paramount. A key question, though, is whether the US Democrats or Starmer's Labour have the will or the wit to lead the intensive political warfare that is already at our doorstep.

Solving the Political Three-Body Problem

Can the political three-body problem be resolved?

A two-body orbital relationship is predictable, but the cosmological three-body problem is notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to solve, as a third body exerts chaotic and unpredictable effects on the other two.³⁸ An analogous dealignment occurs with the political three-body problem, as the national populist third force emerges from the crises of traditional right and left forces and proceeds to destabilise them further.

While the cosmological three-body problem remains unsolved, the political three-body problem can be resolved under certain conditions. The regressive influence of third-force politics can be countered by developing a new progressive hegemony that exerts the necessary 'gravitational pull' to dominate both failing neoliberalism and insurgent national populism.

Establishing sufficient 'political mass' is essential to create a new era of 'progressive stability', which serves as the foundation for a long-term 'new settlement'.³⁹ While the analytical focus on national populism has primarily been on the United States following Trump's victory, this final section shifts the discussion to strategies for defeating national populism within our own political system.

Adapt or resist? It is better to learn to resist

To adapt or resist has been a key dilemma for US Democrats (and the rest of the World) as we waded through the political and ecological wreckage of the November 2024 US election. As of early 2025 and the arrival of Trump 2.0, US national populism as Trumpism looks more strategic than its 2016 iteration and thus much more dangerous.

Clearly, it is important to resist by rejecting racism, nativism and misogyny, but resistance alone will not prove sufficient. To resist strategically means connecting with the people won over to national populism, and who will most likely be betrayed. This requires an exercise in 'political learning'.

National populism has been winning not because it offers viable solutions to the poly-crisis, but because it appeals to the resentments and disappointments of populations at the level of emotions and feelings. At the same time, its politics are wholly wrong. Its rejection of globalisation resonates with social classes left behind by the economic effects of neoliberalism. Gramsci encouraged us to critically engage with opposing viewpoints, captured in his dictum 'there is always a grain of truth in the position of the adversary'.⁴⁰ So where is the grain of truth in national populism? Looking at the focus of its messaging, it has

effectively tapped into the economic anxieties and cultural insecurities of the working class, offering clear and direct messages that resonate with their daily struggles. However, it takes these anxieties, expressed as a form of a dislocated common sense, and re-articulates them in a nativist and regressive direction. Moreover, as it does this, national populism creates a sense of community, belonging and collective identity,⁴¹ particularly around the feeling of being looked down on by what is seen as cultural elites. The experience of being 'othered' can be illustrated by an example closer to home, in the famous chant associated with Millwall FC, 'No one likes us, we don't care'.⁴²

On the other hand, the left, and social democracy in particular, has been poor at relating to people's lived experiences and articulating their discontents and resentments in a progressive direction. In the UK case, perhaps an exception to this was the left populism of Corbynism, but its critiques of neoliberal capitalism were not matched by other political messaging that would appeal to the UK working class.⁴³

The central argument of this final section, informed by insights from the study of national populism, is that a successful progressive strategy must navigate political combinations by maintaining a state of creative tension.

The core tension lies in balancing the push for transition and change with a deep focus on the present realities and the immediate problems affecting people's lives. Rather than framing these tensions as binary opposites, they are conceptualised as 'additions', where seemingly conflicting positions can coexist and be articulated simultaneously.

This framework is applied to five interrelated themes, each of which is explored through its guiding principles and illustrated with examples of potential progressive policies and practices. By embracing these tensions as complementary rather than contradictory, a progressive strategy can achieve greater inclusivity and adaptability, ensuring that both transformative goals and present-day concerns are addressed effectively.

1. The progressive myth and radical pragmatism - Progressive forces need to offer viable practical solutions to demonstrate to electorates that political life can deliver improvements – whether these be economic or ecological. This idea that actions speak louder than words is reflected in the concept of radical pragmatism. In the UK context, Neal Lawson's article in *Renewal* argues for a 'Radical Pragmatic Left' that aims to reconnect with voters and build broad alliances to address the multiple crises facing society, emphasising the need for practical, workable solutions and a comprehensive plan to transform the country, especially in the context of the poly-crisis world.⁴⁴

At the same time, there is an important role for strong political storytelling. Allied to Gramsci's concept of political party as the modern 'myth prince' - a unifying symbol for collective action - is the concept of the 'progressive myth'. This can be seen as a speculative narrative to inspire and direct societal progress, embodying the belief in continuous improvement and the possibility of achieving a fairer and more sustainable future through collective effort and social change.⁴⁵

The idea of a New Settlement is an example of a progressive myth because it asks the political actors in civil society to believe that a new set of economic, social, ecological and political relationships can be established in the foreseeable future.⁴⁶ On the other hand, radical pragmatism, in the context of national populism, would focus on the first practical steps. These could include both the publication of the gradual strategy of achievable policy and practices that both make an immediate material impact for working people (e.g. a focus on better jobs, apprenticeships for young people, improved public services and better public transport).

- 2. Left populism and conservative communitarianism** - In the context of the emotional appeals of national populism, a purely rationalist, technocratic and dry approach to politics risks overestimating the role of the head in relation to the heart. Alongside the politics of delivery, which fosters popular reassurance and security, there is a need for the politics of passion.

*There is a legitimate role for 'left economic and ecological populism', which rightly points the finger at economic and financial elites, accusing them of exploiting the country and burning the planet at the expense of working people and humanity more generally.*⁴⁷

This radical narrative, however, must be accompanied by concrete, practical action to transform society. For example, the Just Transition links the goal of net zero to social justice, which the political right (Conservatives, Reform, and the right-wing media) characterises as a middle-class luxury only a minority of society can afford.⁴⁸ Rapidly transitioning to net zero, capable of gathering popular support, will involve serious government spending, including state support for industries to transition away from fossil fuels and similar levels of support for low and middle-income families to access clean energy and clean transportation, the retrofitting of every house to provide good jobs, lower emissions and even lower bills.⁴⁹

At the same time, these structural changes can be combined with what is termed 'communitarian conservatism', which emphasises the importance of community, social cohesion, local traditions, and the common good, arguing that individual rights should be balanced

with communal responsibilities.⁵⁰ This is not a call to embrace a full ‘Blue Labour’ agenda,⁵¹ but to incorporate some elements within a neo-Gramscian analytical framework. In practical terms this will involve addressing ways of overcoming social fear with a sense of psychological security related to ways of living better lives.⁵² A prime example of visible decline has been the deterioration of high streets, seen by many as a major reflection of the deterioration of everyday life.⁵³ In response, there is a role for ‘progressive sentimentality’, referring to a nostalgic yet forward-looking desire to restore and preserve elements of communal life that are perceived to be in decline. Regarding specific policy, Jon Bloomfield and David Edgar, in their agenda for combatting national populism, call for a ‘covenant for towns’ to address issues of urban renewal.⁵⁴

At the broader level of economics and politics, the combination of left economic populism and communitarian conservatism could involve linking a strong stance on irregular immigration with campaigns and legislation against employer-worker exploitation, while placing greater emphasis on workforce training and apprenticeships for young people.⁵⁵ The more general point about this progressive blend of radical and conservative elements is that building an effective counterstrategy will require necessary frictions within the progressive ideological assemblage, to build broad political coalitions with misalignments being smoothed out over time.

- 3. Core support and a diverse progressive bloc** – Beating national populism depends on winning the political zero-sum game, whereby the social and political forces brought into the progressive bloc are necessarily subtracted from the regressive bloc. One of the lessons highlighted in the section on the European Left is that attention must be paid to building durable political alliances – what Gramsci referred to as the ‘war of position’ – in advance of attempting to form a government. A new counter-hegemony will require the formation of a broad progressive historical bloc that includes novel coalitions of social forces, encompassing not only traditional allies of the left, such as labour unions and progressive intellectuals, but new ecological movements and sections of the working class and marginalised communities that have been drawn to national populism.

In practical terms, a diverse bloc can be cemented locally as well as nationally. At the level of what has been characterised as ‘folk politics’,⁵⁶ actions to regenerate towns could include support for ‘start-ups’ in the high street that link with affordable housing and the development of further education college sites in town centres to create what has been termed a ‘social ecosystem’ to support sustainable ways of working, living and learning.⁵⁷ The ‘working, living and learning nexus’, including a renewed focus on apprenticeships for young people, could appeal to members of the working class,

white and people of colour, who feel their work aspirations have been ignored for decades. Allied to this could be robust campaigns around the gig economy and exploitative warehouse working, such as Amazon, to improve economic rewards for working.⁵⁸

In this demanding task, progressive organic intellectuals and cultural leaders, particularly those drawn from the working class and marginalised communities,⁵⁹ can play a crucial role in shaping the narrative and ideology of the bloc by articulating a vision of the future that is both aspirational and achievable. At the same time, bloc building also includes popular mobilisations against national populism. It is important to remember that the far-right riots of summer 2024 were ended not by police intervention, but by antifascist mobilisations in towns across the country.⁶⁰

4. A socialised model of social media and the active digital citizen

– Social media platforms, dominated by Big Tech, have significantly contributed to the rise of national populism by bypassing traditional media channels and amplifying populist messages. More recently, leading tech figures like Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg have bent their knees to Trump in support of the deregulation of social media in the US. This raises the urgency of the creation of a devolved and much more democratic social media to promote transparency and accountability, ensuring that social media platforms serve the public good.⁶¹

While there has been the recent growth of more responsible platforms such as Bluesky in reaction to the populist actions of Musk and his platform X, in addition to greater regulation, the real battle is at the grassroots to help form the ‘digital citizen’. Alternative media platforms like Bylines, for example, focus on providing a space for independent journalism and community-driven content, free from the influence of large corporations and intrusive ads. At the same time, a new kind of ethical consciousness is needed to ensure the responsible use of social media and artificial intelligence in everyday life.⁶² Here, there is an important educative role for a variety of civil society organisations and processes, including formal schooling and lifelong learning.

- 5. Change and stability** - A fundamental problem lies in the fact that the world needs to change dramatically and quickly, yet people legitimately yearn for stability. ‘All that is solid melts into air’, a quotation from the Communist Manifesto published in 1848 about the destructive dynamics of industrial capitalism, still aptly describes the disruptions caused by neoliberalism and national populism in the early 21st century. These forces have continuously eroded traditional social structures and economic stability, compounded by the growing destabilising role of artificial intelligence. In the context of perceived uncontrollable change,

national populism lures fearful populations with the seductive image of white and male-dominated societies of the 1950s, to which it is impossible to return.

The horns of this dilemma are clear – when people understandably associate change with disruption and deterioration, how can necessary progressive change be combined with necessary stability?

Interestingly, the static equilibrium of the neoliberal crisis is reflected in the paradox of no constant change and no meaningful change. In the context of the neoliberal paradox, the progressive myth could promote the promise of gradual and orderly change towards a fairer, more inclusive, and sustainable society.

To briefly understand the scale of the practical challenges, we can return to the difficult economic and political issue of the Just Transition. Progressive stability, to be achieved through a Just Transition process, would have to ensure that the benefits of economic and environmental reforms are equitably distributed,⁶³ and that valued aspects of society such as the built environment at the local level, where life is immediately experienced, are conserved and restored. The success of radical changes is thus intimately tied to the progressive role of the 'little conservatisms', connected to the deepening of local and participatory democracy, where balances of change and conservation can be collectively decided. This inevitably will be a messy process in which a diverse variety of political and cultural forces must manage the many contradictions to be faced on this 'tensions road' to transitioning. One consequence of this is the need to develop devolved, deliberative processes of problem-solving and decision-making, reflected in innovation such as citizens assemblies.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The goal of progressive stability is the gradual achievement of a ‘new settlement’ — an evolving and enduring political and economic order based on greater social justice, individual and collective security, environmental sustainability, and economic equity. The transitional path will, however, be obstructed by demanding ideological and political struggles, linked to the chaotic interplay of degenerating crises of neoliberalism, the continued weaknesses of the European Left, and the insurgency of national populism.

Nevertheless, this dissection of the political three-body problem suggests what needs to be done to bring about its solution. The painstaking construction of a progressive hegemony with sufficient ‘gravitational pull’ will mean working creatively with multiple tensions: a new combinational politics of change and conservation that balances strong progressive storytelling with effective practical measures; the building and balancing of broad and inclusive economic, social, and political alliances that meet the hopes and aspirations of both the committed and the more sceptical (a comprehensive historical bloc); while ensuring that transitioning to a more inclusive, sustainable, and stable settlement is seen as both gradual and productive of meaningful change.

This vision of progressive stability offers an achievable path to restoring hope and a sense of historical possibility to populations that feel trapped in an era of seemingly endless chaos and despair.

Endnotes

¹ Antonio Gramsci. 1971 translation. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, p 276.

² A discussion of terminology and definitions of national populism, neofascism and far right is located at the beginning of Part 4.

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- ²⁰ See Frank Bandau FN 16.
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