Alternative Horizons

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For much of the twentieth century it was a truism that political behaviour was motivated by material interests. Then, from about the 1970s, this idea began to be displaced by an understanding of politics as a set of struggles over 'values', 'recognition' or 'identities'. Why did this concept of interests decline? First, it was criticised by humanist Marxists such as E. P. Thompson for the scientistic, ahistorical and reductionist way in which it was often used. Second, the rising militancy of new social movements – for Black freedom, women's liberation, queer emancipation – challenged the notion that all political struggles could be explained in terms of class interest alone. Third, the restoration of liberal hegemony in the academy created a fertile environment for individualistic, psychologistic and idealist interpretations. Within radical thought, this confluence – sometimes referred to as the 'cultural turn' – led many theorists to sideline class and materialist explanations.

The last decade has seen a salutary course correction of this theoretical drift. Marxists have sought to defend class analysis and to revive the explanatory power and political salience of material interests. Yet this new tendency is not without its flaws. In a recent article for *Sidecar*, Dylan Riley, echoing Thompson's original critique, argues that the backlash against the idealism of the cultural turn has succumbed to an unwitting idealism of its own. Riley characterises this 'new Marxist culture' as propounding a metaphysics which renders the idea of material interests an abstraction, endowed with causal power over living individuals. A prominent example here may be the work of Vivek Chibber, whose book *The Class Matrix* (2022) lays out the case for a renewed emphasis on class interests as the decisive determinant of political behaviour. Although a valuable corrective, in certain respects *The Class Matrix* risks bending the stick too far the other way, overlooking the genuine issues raised by feminists, anti-racists and the New Left.

In our book *Hegemony Now* (2022), we attempt to find a way out of this impasse. Our conception of material interests begins from the premise that two things can simultaneously be true: the political and theoretical questions posed by the movements of the 1960s and 1970s remain valid; reactivating the concept of material interests need not entail returning to forms of orthodox Marxism that never took those questions seriously to begin with. Our model attempts to retain the idea of material interests in a manner that acknowledges the advances of the last half-century.

What, Riley asks, does 'material interests' really mean? We argue that they should be understood not as obdurate economic facts – imagined, as Riley puts it, to derive automatically from a person's 'position in a system of property relations' – but as bundles of capacities that members of social groups could realise under certain circumstances. Riley argues that material interests become abstract to the degree that they are not linked to a realisable future, a plausible alternative. From our perspective, it is important to distinguish between interests that are realisable within the current historical context – achievable goals within an existing political framework – and those that could only be realised given a more significant change in

socio-economic circumstances. Rather than viewing material interests as an abstraction unless they are immediately viable, we argue for thinking along a spectrum between abstraction and viability. Different sets of interests can be realised at different 'horizons of realisability'. Those that could only be realised in a distantly imaginable future can be understood to exist more 'virtually', whereas shorter-term interests that have been articulated by existing political movements can be understood as 'demands' active on the field of political contention.

As Stuart Hall notes in *The Hard Road to Renewal* (1988), every individual and social group is characterised by a variety of interests, some of them contradictory or in tension. We argue that different sets of interests are capable of being activated in different contexts – realised at different horizons, or on different temporal scales. Some groups may endorse reactionary projects in a historical situation that seems unpropitious for more radical programmes. Workers, for example, might ally themselves with a racist political leader promising to protect their sectional privileges within the labour market if no multi-ethnic, class-based project for social democratic reforms that would benefit all workers is forthcoming – or is considered 'unrealistic'. Conservatism of all kinds is defined by this defensive orientation, whereby the objective is safeguarding present capacities (both economic and cultural) against external threats.

Given the default capitalist-realist horizon is one narrowed to the point that protecting existing privileges seems the pressing and only practicable, 'realistic' objective, a key task of radical politics must be to encourage people to orient their political behaviour towards a 'higher' or further possible horizon – in a sense, towards the *least* immediately viable future. Appealing to interests that have no connection to an objectively plausible future is 'essentially unreal' as Riley writes. But what is objectively plausible – what counts as real or unreal, probable or improbable – is, as Riley says, itself 'historically constructed through struggles'. The building of class consciousness is in part a project of encouraging individuals and collectives to orient themselves to a horizon beyond that of immediate self-defence: to instil belief in the plausibility of alternatives.

This is why, in our view, the utopian impulse to abstraction can never be fully exorcised from radical politics. We agree with Riley that interests only take on reality in the process of struggle – when they achieve, in our terms, the status of demands. But part of the role of radical agitation, of political speculation and of utopian art and culture is to gesture towards the alternative worlds and ways of being beyond the ambit of immediate need. Such visions have the potential to evolve our collective sense of what the future might be.

This is precisely why it is important not to conceptualise material interests as transhistorical categories existing outside of specific social conjunctures. Interests – human capacities, in our terms – change as historical circumstances change. Yet the process that brings new circumstances into being is itself constituted by the organised pursuit of realisable interests. This touches on one of the central debates in Marxist and post-Marxist theories of history: are historical outcomes determined primarily by class struggle, or by the level of the 'productive forces'? Our answer is that this is a false dichotomy and that neither factor is independently 'primary': technological change is at once produced by, and gives rise to, dynamics of class struggle. That we have been led back to such a perennial issue demonstrates how fundamental Riley's question is.