IS THE WORKING CLASS NO LONGER AN EFFECTIVE AGENCY OF SOCIAL CHANGE?

It would seem that the politics of the present is an indication that the role of the working class is no longer significant or has become subordinated to the apparently competing importance of the middle class. This standpoint is outlined by Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley in the book: ‘The New Politics of Class’ (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017) They summarise their views in the two following comments: “There was a time when, odd though it may seem today, British politics was focused on the needs and desires of the working class. Post-war Britain saw the emergence of not just the welfare state but also by a determination of politicians of all parties never to return to the mass unemployment of the 1930’s. Both these developments were implemented in the name of the working class. A form of corporatism was adopted by both Conservative and Labour governments so that working class interests were represented politically and the ‘forward march of labour’ was consolidated as part of the ‘long revolution’. (p1) But this situation has radically changed: “This seems a long time ago now. The economic structure of Britain today is quite different to that of the 1950’s. There has been radical deregulation of the economy, the trade union movement has become a shadow of its former self, and most importantly there are simply more people with middle class jobs. The rise of the middle class often been seen as indicating the end of both class division and of the political importance of class. Shrinking divisions between social classes are seen as a natural consequence of deindustrialization, increased affluence, greater welfare provision and the breakdown of traditional class communities…..We are thus left with an amorphous social structure devoid of class difference, a society in which everyone is middle class or has no class at all.” (p1)

The first comment seems to ignore the fact that the very character of British capitalism in the immediate post-war period was based on an emphasis on the development of the consumption of the working class in order to promote the possibility of capital accumulation. This situation enabled the workers to develop their level of class cohesion and organisation in order to take advantage of these circumstances. In other words, there was a temporary convergence between the requirements of capital and the interests of the workers to improve their material situation. But the end of the period the boom meant that this situation was replaced by one of intensifying of the class struggle, and of action by the capitalist classes and bourgeois governments to undermine the influence of the trade unions and of the workers within society. The effective defeat of the trade unions in this situation meant that the influence of the working class in economic and political terms was undermined. But this development is not of a durable nature if the trade unions are able to re-develop their ability to take militant action in defend of their interests. But this is what is being denied by the authors because they consider that the very character of society has changed to becoming one based on the interests of the middle class, who effectively exclude the ability of the workers to be able to influence the development of economic and political events. Such a perspective seems to ignore the fact that it has been conservative type governments, with the support of the capitalist class, who have carried out measures to try and reduce the importance of the role of the working class within society. It has not been the middle class who in some manner have acted in conscious terms to undermine the social importance of the role of the working class. Instead economic changes have led to the increased significance of the white-collar worker, or what is often defined as the middle class. But it has to be indicated that both the blue collar working class and the middle class are subordinated to the interests of the capitalist class within the process of production and economic activity in general, and so the actual issue for socialists is to try and advocate the development of unity between these two strata of society. In other words, the perspective that there is some inherent and contrasting contradiction in relation to the interests of the working class and middle class has to be rejected and instead we have to elaborate the possibility of unity between these two sections of society which are both subordinated and exploited by the imposition of the imperatives of capital accumulation.

However, this rejection of the views of the author does not mean that there are not social tensions between the working class and the middle class. Indeed, it could be argued that these differences are utilised by the most privileged defenders of capitalism in order to uphold the interests of the system. Indeed, it may seem that the better social situation of sections of the middle class seem to be responsible for the apparent underprivileged position of the working class. Thus, the social differentiation of the various strata of society could be considered to be the plausible explanation for the development of economic and political inequality within society. But the most convincing understanding of this situation is that it is the forces of capital which benefit from the lack of solidarity between the middle class and working class. In other words, there is an inherent interest between developing forms of cooperation between the white collar and blue-collar staff in terms of their cooperative role within the process of production or services. This aspect is indicated by the necessity of close cooperation between the different strata of any modern enterprise that is comprised of both mass production and the utilisation of modern technology. Indeed, the various members of an enterprise may be members of the same trade union, or even if they are part of different unions they cooperate closely together in terms of common objectives within the same enterprise. But in ideological terms it is the political role of reactionary parties to try and create differences between the working class and middle class. The myth of the liberal middle class is utilised in order to create working class opposition to progressive political causes, and the stereotype of the ignorant blue-collar worker is also utilised to try and create an elitism within the middle class. But the point is that these differences are ultimately to the benefit of the forces of capital which utilised such tensions in order to maintain the present system. However, it is wrong to suggest that in some sense the middle class exploits the working class for its own benefit. The middle class may have aspects of a privileged situation when compared to the working class, but this does not amount to the expression of exploitation and domination. Instead it is only the capitalist class that is able to exploit the middle class and the workers for the benefit of the present economic system. However, the actuality of social differentiation can create tensions and differences that result in the difficulties involved in creating empathy between the workers and middle class. For example, the very term ‘student’ can be considered to be an expression of an insult, and the justification of the rejection of the aims of progressive causes by the working class. Whilst the middle class can define workers as being ‘plebs’ which suggests attitudes of ignorance and prejudice in relation to the views of people with blue collar jobs. But these types of divisions can only ultimately benefit the interests of the capitalist class, who are able to ensure the continuation of the system because of the ability to divide and rule the people of society. In this context the task of Marxism is to promote the unity of the working class and middle class in relation to the aim of developing opposition to the capitalist system.

It could be argued that this task is unrealistic because the middle class has become affluent and privileged and so has an interest in maintaining the present system, whilst the workers are not powerful enough to bring about the demise of capitalism. Indeed, this view seems to be the standpoint of the authors. But the point is that both the working class and the middle class are subject to the domination of capital and so because of this situation there is an inherent common interest that can be developed and realised in terms of action against the interests of the capitalist class. However, the influence of reactionary forms of ideology often undermines the possibility to develop this type of unity and this is because of the contradictions caused by the process of social differentiation within the given enterprise, or society in general. The task of socialists is to advocate policies that can aim to overcome these divisions in terms of the promotion of unity within the workplace against the exploitative aims of capital. This standpoint can also be extended to society in general such as the demand for more housing and the improvement of the NHS and education. The point is that both the working class and middle-class benefit from opposing the exploitation of the employer, or demanding improvements to society. In this context the call to end austerity and regenerate the welfare state could provide the political unity of the diverse strata of society in order to facilitate the realisation of a left-wing Labour government.

In other words, the major problems are not caused by the middle class acting to undermine the importance of the working class within society. This is not to suggest that the middle class does not have a more privileged relation to the system of capitalism than the majority of the working class in terms of the role of skills, security of employment and levels of wages or salaries. But this situation is caused by the advantages of education in relation to the role of work rather than because of an ability to dominate the relations of production. This aspect is an expression of the importance and character of the capitalist class who ultimately have a situation of domination over both the middle class and working class. Such a view is not expressed by the authors who instead consider that the privileges of the middle class are an expression of inherent domination in relation to the role of the working class. But in order to sustain this type of argument would mean developing an analysis that was able to sustain the view that the middle class was the most dominant class within society. The authors try to uphold this standpoint by implying that the privileged position of the middle class is an expression of their primary importance within society. But in actuality the middle class are still a subordinated class even if they have a privileged position in comparison to the role of the workers. However, the character of society is defined in terms of the importance of ownership of the means of production and this aspect is defined by the dominating role of the capitalist class. Only to the extent that the middle class also includes the petty bourgeoise, or small owners of capital, could it be suggested that they are a section of the capitalist class. This means that the middle class does not have a primary character as the exploiters of labour, and instead their social position means that they could become the compatible allies of the working class in terms of the aspirations for renewal of the role of the welfare state, the building of more houses, and the possibility for self-improvement in terms of the prospect of a good education. Indeed, it is an aspiration of many working people to become part of the middle class, and so in that sense the middle class is not something to oppose but is instead an expression of self-improvement or social mobility. Many members of the Labour party are middle class people with a working-class background, which they consider to be something to be proud of. This sense of affinity with a heritage based on a connection with the working class is an expression of the fact that there is a close connection between the different social strata. In contrast, the Conservative party tries to create animosity between workers and the middle class in order to take advantage of a situation of divide and rule. The Tories appeal to workers to resent the social progress made by the middle class, whilst also appealing to the white-collar worker to reject any sense of affinity with the blue-collar worker. But this ideology of divide and rule can be rejected in practice by the role of the trade unions which indicates the necessity of unity of different social strata in terms of opposing the demands of the employers and instead indicates the importance of unity in relation to the objectives generated by having a common interest in the workplace. The history of the Labour party has been based on the realisation of the importance of the connections between the working class and the middle class, who have united in terms of the promotion of common demands based on social and economic justice. In contrast the authors imply that the apparent increasing importance of the middle class has marginalised the role of the working class. But in actuality the undermining of the importance of the working class has been caused by the offensive of capital against labour in the period of austerity since the mid 1980’s. In this context the increasing importance of the role of the middle class has ben caused by technological changes that have indicated the significance of the white collar labour, and so in this context the development of the middle class has not been based on an opposition to industrial labour. Instead it has been the role of capital which has attempted to undermine the economic power of the traditional forms of the working class. Therefore, it is in the interests of both the middle class and the working class to develop unity within the various workplaces and to strive to achieve common objectives in contrast to the antagonistic interests of the role of capital. It is only the party of capital, such as the Conservatives, who thrive from the attempt to create divisions between the working class and middle class.

The authors reject this view because they consider that the emphasis of political practice has been at the expense of the interests of the working class and in favour of the middle class. But this is an ideological divide that is based on strategies that favour the continuation of the present character of society. The actual interests of the working class and the middle class favour the generation of social unity around common objectives of an agreed political policy. Indeed, it was on this basis that the Labour government of 1945 created the welfare state. But with the ideology that the trade unions have too much power, the Conservative party attempted to develop support within the middle class and sections of the workers against the influence of the working class within society. This standpoint was based on an offensive of capital against labour and the generation of mass unemployment in the 1980’s in order to try and intensify the subordination of the working class within the process of production. A policy of privatisation of the nationalised industries was utilised in order to obtain the support of sections of the middle class for this project. The result of this approach was to reduce the level of support to the Labour party to that of the trade unions, and nationalism, via the role of the Falklands war, was used to obtain the support of the less class conscious workers for the project of an imperial Britain. The Labour party was unable to oppose this development because of its failure to develop policies to try and unite the middle class and working class. But Tony Blair opportunistically adapted to the social changes within society by adopting the programme of Conservatism and in that manner accepted the differentiation of the various social strata within society. However, the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party has created the basis to unite the working class and middle class in new progressive terms. He is concerned about the issues that motivate the middle-class activist like the question of ecology, whilst also being a supporter of the defence of the interests of the working class. His support for the role of the welfare state is an indication that he is aware of the necessity of a policy to unite the working class and the middle class. Therefore, what has become apparent is that the view that the working class is perpetually subordinated within society can be challenged by the emancipatory potential of a political policy to create social progress. In contrast the views of the authors are based on the understanding that the social trends and developments of the recent period cannot be challenged. But the importance of political leadership and initiative can indicate that the view that the working class is in a situation of inherent decline can be shown to be premature. Instead the workers can still be an important agency of social change because of the inspiration provided by the role of political initiative. Indeed, it has to be indicated that the project of Corbyn cannot be successful if it is primarily dependent on the support of middle-class activists. Instead it can only become successful if a radical Labour government is elected based on the support of the working class and middle class. This is why the unity of these social strata in terms of adherence to a popular programme is vital for the success of the advance of the aim of socialism. This development has to have the form of enhanced trade union strength and popular support for a radical political agenda. In contrast the Conservatives can only try to undermine this development by appeals to crude forms of nationalism. But this perspective cannot succeed if the Labour movement is able to unite the working class and middle class in progressive terms. But the authors cannot recognise these possibilities because they can only envisage the working class as a defeated and increasingly insignificant class. But the logical result of this viewpoint is to reject the possibility of progressive change because of an effective description of the role of the working class as a bastion of reaction. In this manner the progressive section of the middle class becomes defined as a minority that cannot establish sufficient popularity for its ideas in order for them to be realised. Instead the domination of capitalism in terms of the reactionary role of a demoralised working class becomes defined as the permanent expression of the political situation. However, this pessimistic view denies the progressive potential of an alliance of the working class and the middle class. This possibility is indicated by the support already given to the project of Jeremy Corbyn.

The authors suggest that the working class has become marginalised and lacks effective political representation in relation to the character of the major political parties. This point may have had validity in the recent period, but it is not necessarily true in relation to the project of the Corbyn led Labour party which is based on the attempt to regenerate the role of the welfare state and to support the influence of the trade unions within society. In this context the other major parties attempt to undermine this potential development in terms of the support for nationalism. But the ideology of nationalism has no connection with the working-class interest except in the vague terms as expressing an emotional attachment to the country of origin. In this context it could be quite possible to develop support for the Corbyn project because it has the potential to realise the social improvement of the position of the working class. This possibility is based on an end to austerity that is being suggested by the policies of the Labour party in the present. It is the issue of the EU which expresses the possibility to divide the working class in terms of the contrasting appeal of nation or class. The trade unions are generally in favour of the relation of the UK with the EU because of the possibility to ensure social progress in this context, but the unorganised sections of the working class because of demoralisation are more likely to be supporters of BREXIT. It is this split within the working class and not the role of the middle class which presently weakens the ability of the workers to make an effective intervention in political terms. This division can be overcome by an attempt to resolve the issue of the relationship of the UK to the EU in terms that are based on the possibility to uphold the overall interests of the working class. The Conservatives emphasise the importance of BREXIT because they recognise that this is the basis to obtain support of some sections of the working class. The Labour party can undermine this development in terms of a coherent position on the relation of the UK to the EU which is based on the possibility to uphold the economic interests of the working class and middle class.

The authors divide the working class into skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers and the middle class into the old middle class, or small employers, the new middle class or professional employees and supervisors and junior middle class or routine white-collar workers. The new middle class has become increasingly socially important because of the increasing significance of university degree qualifications. This analysis seems to be valid in terms of its understanding of the different forms of occupational status of the middle and working class, but it ignores the relation of both of these classes to the role of capital. The point is that both the middle and working class are subordinated to the interests of capital within the relations of production. This means that the middle class and the working class have a common interest in opposing this situation of domination by capital, and in this manner, it would be of mutual benefit to support forms of trade union and political organisation that defended this mutual interest of opposition to capital. But for reasons of ideology the situation is often characterised by a mistrust between the middle and working class because they consider that they have distinct interests which cannot be reconciled. The result of this disunity is to the benefit of the capitalist system which has politicians such as in the Tory party that are able to utilise the various social tensions to the continued advantage of the present economic and political system.

It is argued by the authors that increasingly the parties appeal to the interests of the new middle class and neglect the importance of the working class. This point is questionable because Thatcher utilised nationalism in order to obtain working class support for the project of the transformation of the economy in the 1980’s. The Falklands war was utilised in order to gloss over the anti-working class character of the economic changes in the 1980’s, whilst the Labour party under Blair tried to make an appeal to both the middle class and the working class for its limited adherence to the role of the welfare state in the situation of globalisation. Hence the most successful electoral strategy was for both major parties to try and appeal to both the working class and middle class. This meant that a left-wing alternative was excluded by this domination of the political system by the two major established parties. But with the ascendency of Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour party it may be possible to make a new type of appeal to the working class and the middle class. This is based on a programme of social justice and the renewal of the welfare state. In other words, both the working class and middle class have an interest in the ending of austerity and the regeneration of the economy in terms of increasing affluence for all sections of society. But Corbyn will only be successful if he can win an election with sufficient support from both the working class and middle class. What is of particular importance is for the Labour party to try and regain the support of the unskilled workers who have increasingly voted for other parties in nationalist terms. This aim is possible if the Labour party can convince people that it is serious about its intention to improve society in the interests of the majority of the people. In this context the trade unions have a role in trying to develop the understanding that the interests of all working people are with the election of a Labour government.

The authors outline how the middle class has better levels of wages or salaries, more stable employment, and more educational success than the various sections of the working class. The possibility of upward social mobility from the working class is more difficult, although there is some relationship of the most skilled sections of the workers to the role of the middle class. But the point is that the character and role of the middle class is not responsible for this situation and that instead it is the situation of the domination of capital which defines and explains the social structure of these subordinate classes within society. In this context despite the hierarchical distinction between the middle class and the working class it could be argued that both of these classes have a common interest in the realisation of what are common aims such as the increase of wages and the improvement of economic and social conditions. However, there is an issue of status that still has importance in that the occupations of the middle class have greater esteem when compared to may blue collar jobs. This distinction can be challenged by the attempt of the working class to achieve better levels of wages and conditions. This difference can also be overcome by the increased expansion of the skilled character of working-class work, as expressed in terms of an increase of apprenticeships. But this development would mean that it would be necessary to elect a genuinely progressive Labour government that could promote the development of more skilled manual work. In this context it would be necessary to undermine the economic power of capital which is based on the important role of unskilled labour. The point being made is that it is capital which is responsible for differences of status and renumeration between the middle and working class. Such a situation can only begin to be changed in terms of the election of a left-wing government that was dedicated to trying to transform this inequality by the policy of the creation of more skilled labour, and by the increasing of wages for unskilled labour. Ultimately it would become possible to combine the necessary role of unskilled labour with the development of skilled work by the same workers. But this prospect would depend on the transformation of the character of the economy from being merely based on the interests of the profit of capital into an economy based on the realisation of the needs of the people.

The authors outline the various indicators of inequality between the working and middle class, as in relation to levels of income, stability or un-stability of employment and expectations of social mobility. But the point is what is the cause of these inequalities, which is not addressed by the authors. It is the dynamics of the capitalist economy that mean that some people have to have relatively privileged white collar work, whilst other people are skilled or unskilled manual workers. In a genuinely different socialist type of economy it would become possible to have more mobility between work, and to some extent increased leisure time would compensate for the alienating character of the role of manual work. Furthermore, it would be necessary and practical to enhance the level of skill of all types of manual work and to increase the use of Roberts in order to carry out some of the most arduous and unskilled type of jobs. In other words, the authors describe the present situation but do not explain its character in terms of the role of causation. The basis of the hierarchy of classes is because of the dynamics and interests of a capitalist economy. It is not the middle class who are responsible for a situation of privilege when compared to the situation of the working class. But in a different form of reasoning the authors explain the ideology of the present situation in contrasting terms: “Other researches have claimed that rather than class identity disappearing, middle class identification has now become the norm in modern society. This change is principally attributed to increasing affluence leading to people in working class jobs seeing themselves as middle class. The benefits of economic prosperity in the post-war era have been spread more equally across social classes, whilst the welfare state has also served to reduce the more extreme hardships associated with class inequality.”(p47) The authors dispute this view and contend that most people associate themselves with a particular class based on occupation, income and education. They also contend that the levels of self-esteem of the working class has decreased because of an increasing awareness of the significance of poverty being associated with manual work. But no reasons are given for this understanding. The point is that it is the increasing imposition of policies of austerity by successive governments since the 1980’s which has led to periods of mass unemployment and the connected development of generalised poverty in sections of the working class. But the cause of this situation is not the role of the middle class but instead the character of the economic and political policy of various governments which has associated the interests of capital with the realisation of a worsening situation for the working class in general. This situation has been expressed by the decreasing influence of the trade unions, who have been weakened by the various anti-trade union legislation and the situation of economic slump. In other words, it has been the character of the class struggle which has led to marginalisation of sections of the working class and the effective creation of a group that could be defined as the ‘new poor’.

The authors indicate that there is still a high level of identification by many people with the description as working class, and that this has remained stable during the recent period. But what they only briefly mention is that this self-description is increasing connected to the conception of being a defeated and weakened class with decreasing economic and political power. This situation is connected to the implications of the offensive of capital against labour in the recent period which has undermined the social gains of the post war era. The welfare state, the most important gain of the working class since the end of the second world war, has been undermined by the actions of successive governments who have connected globalisation with the necessity of an offensive against the labour movement. In this context the issue of defence of the interests of the working class has become reduced to the individualist response of the possibility of achieving social mobility in terms of advancement to the middle class. The connection between the interests of the working class and collective class action via the role of the trade unions has been discredited by these new developments. Hence the authors outline that despite the working class still having egalitarian attitudes such as supporting the redistribution of wealth, they are also less likely to be involved in trade unions which have increasingly become an expression of the interests of the white-collar middle class. The result of these developments is that the working class is considered by the authors to be an increasingly defensive class that has increasingly reactionary views on issues like the EU and immigration. In contrast, the new middle class has more progressive views on these questions. But the point is what is the connection between the genuine class interests of the workers and these populist attitudes? If it can be suggested that such attitudes are the result of an adverse balance of class forces, then the attempt to develop support for more a progressive standpoint could be connected to the improvement of the social position of the working class. This possibility is indicated by Corbyn who connects an end to austerity with the retaining of a relationship with the EU. Furthermore, the generation of genuine economic prosperity would mean that immigration would no longer be a major issue, and so it would be possible to end restrictions on immigration to the UK. In other words, the issue of progress in the class struggle and the regeneration of the economic situation would be the basis to change attitudes on the issues of the EU and immigration.

The point is that when the Conservative party is in the ascendency the various attitudes within society become more right-wing. This means that the association of imperialism and the national interest is considered to be more credible and supportable because it corresponds to the ideology of an important and influential political party. Such a development is reinforced by the fact that the Labour party is unable to oppose this advocacy of reactionary forms of nationalism, and instead it tries to adapt to this situation. The result is that only a resolute group of Marxists tend to uphold the internationalist interests of the working class, but the influence of these organisations is miniscule and so the result is that there is an ideological consensus in favour of the approach of nationalism within the major classes of society. However, this apparent agreement in favour of the supposed national interest has been undermined on the issue of BREXIT. This situation has indicated that the interests of the British economy express the necessity for the UK to retain close economic connections with the EU. It is in the interests of capital not to support a No-deal BREXIT. Hence there is actually a temporary correspondence between the aims of capital and labour when compared to the populism of the Conservatives. But the Conservative party hopes to benefit from the sentiment of nationalism within the population, and in particular in relation to the views of sections of the working class. However, the economic catastrophe that will result from a No Deal BREXIT will generate increasing working-class support for an alternative approach. This standpoint is already articulated by Jeremy Corbyn who is outlining the connection of a referendum on any Labour government negotiated agreement with the EU. The point is that the nationalism of the working class is not an absolute political factor and is instead an expression of demoralisation within sections of the worker about the present situation. Changing and more adverse circumstances combined with an imaginative policy of a Labour government could transform these attitudes in a more progressive manner.

The authors indicate that the Labour party has made increasingly less references to the interests of the working class in the recent period. It has instead implied that it increasingly represents the interests of the middle class. But this orientation occurred in the context of the period of the Blair government and so this perspective will be changed in connection to the Corbyn era. Instead what is becoming apparent is an attempt to appeal for support from the middle class and working class in terms of the defence of the welfare state, a new referendum on membership of the EU, and support for ecological causes and opposition to forms of oppression. This approach is entirely realistic because the working class and middle class have identical interests in the improvement of society and the defence of the role of the public sector. In other words, the approach of the authors who contrast the interests of the middle and working class is dogmatic and is not in accordance with the character of society. It is also possible that the new and principled approach of the Labour party could be successful because the Tories only have the limited alternative of populist nationalism. This means the historic connection of the Tories with the interests of capitalism has been undermined and so this situation results in a crisis that could only benefit the interests of the labour movement.

The authors argue that the votes of sections of the working class that was formerly an expression of support for the Labour party is now expressed by adherence to right wing nationalist formations, like UKIP and now the BREXIT party. But in replay to this view we have to establish that the working class is not a politically homogenous class. It has divisions, and a progressive section, often members of the trade unions, still vote in favour of the Labour party. Indeed, it can be argued that this support has been consolidated with the advent of the Corbyn leadership of the Labour party. In this context the task is to develop policies that can regain the support that is now given to the nationalist formations. The point is that the disaffection of the working class with the Labour party was initially because this organisation seemed to be no longer based on the importance of realising the aspirations of the most disadvantaged sections of society. But the election of Corbyn as leader of the Labour party indicates the possibility to tackle this issue in terms of an approach of an end to austerity and the regeneration of the role of the welfare state. But the problem is that without a general election it is not yet possible to implement this progressive agenda. Instead the BREXIT party and the populist influenced Tories are able to compete for the support of the nationalist inclined sections of the working class. But this approach is based on the illusion that the British economy would benefit from a relation of separation from the EU. But this is a recipe for economic chaos that poses the problem of an end to the supply of many food items and important goods that are needed in order to meet the needs of the British people. Thus, the problem for the supporters of BREXIT is that their programme is unworkable and unrealistic. In this context the political basis will be created for the possibility of for the Labour party to regain its popular support amongst the poorest sections of the working class. In this manner the prospect of ending the division of the working class between its trade unionist and unorganised sections can be overcome by the increased credibility of a radical programme of change in the context of what will be the failure to realise BREXIT in an efficient manner. In this sense it will be possible to develop a new form of unity between the progressive sections of the middle class and a reunited working class. On this basis the potential for progressive social change will become a credible possibility.

The authors dispute this perspective because they consider that the relations between the middle class and the working class is one of antagonism, and so the increased ascendency of the importance of the middle class has meant the decline of the significance of the working class: “The presence of a large working class shaped British party politics for much of the post-war period…..this has fundamentally changed. Why has this happened? Class has not disappeared, objective inequalities among classes, class identities, and ideological divisions between classes are unchanged. Britain remains a class divided society. It is the very fact that class divisions have remained so pronounced that has produced such important changes in the political parties. As the middle class has expanded, the policies and images that parties present to the voters has changed to accommodate this. Voters have noticed and acted accordingly.” (p191) In other words the increased influence of the middle class in society is somehow responsible for the decline of the social importance of the working class. An aspect of the character of the middle class is to undermine the capacity of the working class to act as an agency of social change. This article rejects this view of the apparent antagonistic interests that demarcate the working class and the middle class. The role of the middle class is not to objectively or subjectively undermine the importance of the working class. Indeed, it could be argued that the composition of the working class is based on a constant process of interaction with the middle class in terms of either social mobility or interaction at work or socially. Furthermore, the apparently privileged position of the middle class does not necessarily make it a powerful ally of the ruling class in terms of opposing any attempt at social change by the working class. Instead both the middle class and the working class are part of an interconnected process of economic activity in which both classes are effectively exploited to the benefit of capital. Therefore, they have an inherent interesting in acting in cooperation in order to oppose the interests of capitalism and instead promote an agenda of social progress. Indeed, this aspect could be considered to have been an integral aspect of the history of the labour movement in countries like the UK.

Instead of this assumption of different interests between the working class and middle class we would argue that the major problem of the present is the influence of nationalism within the working class. The result of this situation is support for reactionary formations that are integrally opposed to the genuine interests of workers in the improvement of the character of society. Hence, opposing nationalist ideology is the major task of the forces of genuine socialism. In this context the task is to create unity between the presently divided progressive and reactionary sections of the working class. However, the authors are sceptical about the possibilities represented by a Corbyn led Labour party to reconnect with its former working-class base. They comment: “If Labour moves to the left then might that reignite mainstream class politics? It might, but Labour under Corbyn is not just more left-wing but also more socially liberal, especially on key issues like immigration. This suggests that Labour will find it hard to regain its old ‘core’ voters who tend to be more socially conservative, especially on key issues like immigration.” (p194) But this comment was written before the apparent justification of a perspective of a No-deal BREXIT. The potential economic upheaval that will be generated by this policy is likely to create the conditions for mass unemployment. In these conditions the only logical approach will be to support the Labour party that is promising an alternative in terms of a deal with the EU. In this context the influence of nationalism will be undermined, and a more progressive sense of class interest will emerge. In this context the view of the authors that the Labour party should concentrate on maximising its appeal with the progressive sections of the middle class is both a pessimistic and impractical approach. The point is that the Labour party cannot get re-elected without regaining its former working-class support. This prospect becomes favourable because of the problems associated with a No-deal BREXIT. In this situation it should become apparent that only the Labour party has an approach that is based on both upholding an economic relationship with the EU, and in this manner upholding the possibility to avoid economic upheaval. In this manner the apparent rejection of politics by sections of the working class can be overcome because it will become obvious that the defence of employment and social conditions depends on the realisation of a deal between the UK and EU. Only a labour government can express this possibility, and in this manner the possibility to re-establish the relationship of demoralised sections of the working class with the politics of the labour movement can be realised. This process will create the basis to regenerate the struggle for socialism in the UK.

In other words, the book by Evans and Tilley does not prove that the middle class and the working class have an antagonistic and opposed relationship. Indeed, they do not argue this view in any systematic manner, apart from suggesting that British politics has become more concerned with the interests of the middle class. Contrary to the implicit assumptions of the book: ‘The New politics of Class’, it has been the argument of this article that the creation of an effective alliance between the middle class and working class is necessary in order to promote the progress of left wing politics based on the principles of social change. It will be argued that the middle class with its superior levels of education will dominate in this alliance, and so its interests will dominate over those of the working class. Indeed, it can be argued that this has been the historical situation since the very inception of socialist types of parties. It could be suggested that Lenin upheld this elitism when he implied that the party should dominate over the class that is only capable of trade union consciousness. But this type of elitism can be a thing of the past if we recognise that unless the working class and middle class become genuine equal partners there will always be an aspect of mistrust that could undermine the generation of the success of the struggle for socialism. In relation to the character of contemporary society there will not be socialism unless there is unity between the white collar and blue-collar workers. The trade unions are a major expression of this type of unity, and a party based on the trade unions will be able to promote the aim of social progress of society in an effective manner. But it is also necessary to create a credible revolutionary organisation that is able to promote the ideal that a classless society is ultimately the basis to realise consistent social equality. In this type of society all divisions of class will be overcome, and it will be possible for everyone to realise their potential. The continuing limitations of capitalism means that the unity of the middle class and working class is still required if the mass basis of a party able to change society is to be created. The realistic aspect of this perspective means that the pessimistic approach of Evans and Tilley can be rejected as being unable to recognise the credible basis of these possibilities. However, this criticism does not mean that it will be easy to overcome the domination of capitalism, which is justified by an ideology that socialism is an unrealistic alternative. Consequently, protracted agitation as to why change is possible has to systematically occur if the political conditions for change are to be realised. An aspect of this ideological process is to reject the view that the working class has become nothing more than a force for reactionary politics. Instead the limitations of capitalism still indicate the possibilities to strive for an alternative. This point is indicated by the very uncertainties of BREXIT.

The point is that it would be dogmatic to assume that a section of the working class would support right wing nationalism and populism in all circumstances. Indeed, this development is an aspect of the fact that some people have become sceptical about the possibilities of an alternative that would improve their social situation. However, the very adverse consequences of a No-deal Brexit would generate the possibilities to establish the credibility of an alternative. In the context of tremendous economic and political upheaval it would become more obvious that the interests of working people are with the prospect of maintaining a relationship between the EU and the UK. The authors would possibly dispute this view because they contend that the disaffection of sections of the working class with the limitations of society is expressed in terms of support for nationalism and right-wing parties. But a change of circumstances would mean that this connection could be undermined by the role of a Labour party that was able to promote an alternative that was able to generate full employment and economic stability because of the continuation of a relationship between the EU and the UK. The authors could not anticipate these possibilities because their book was written around the time of the referendum about the membership of the EU. In this context the complexities involved in the UK leaving the EU were not anticipated or understood. Therefore, the complications of the situation mean that the general mood about the UK leaving the EU is no longer one of general anticipation and is instead defined by bewilderment. In this context the possibility to develop support for an alternative is created by this situation of uncertainty. This means that the Labour party could regain support because it has a position based on the continuation of a definite relationship between the EU and the UK. In this context the view that the working class is inherently nationalist could be contrasted with increasing support for an alternative approach that is not based on the principles of No-Deal Brexit.

In other words, the view of Evans and Tilley that the working class is inherently nationalist and so has become inherently reactionary is possibly an expression of the projection of a temporary situation into a supposed permanent condition of a declining class. This understanding is impressionistic and dogmatic, and it does not allow for the possibilities expressed by changing political circumstances. In particular what is underestimated is the potential for Corbyn to develop support for the Labour party because of the advocacy of a policy that is based on the interests of the working class in general. The nationalist tendencies of the working class have been a reaction to particular political circumstances, but these are changing and creating new possibilities. In these changing conditions the possibility to create a progressive coalition of the working class and middle class emerges. This development would create the political conditions to elect a left-wing Labour government. However, the question immediately arises: does it represent the undermining of the role of the working class to consider that it is necessary to create an alliance with the middle class in order to realise progressive political possibilities? However, it is important to establish that this issue of cross-class alliances is not unprecedented. Lenin outlines the potential for an alliance of the workers, intellectuals and peasants in order to carry out the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution in Russia. But the issue of an alliance of the middle class and working class has not been considered in similar strategic terms because Marxists have generally considered the middle class as being part of the working class. This understanding does not explain the important social differences between the middle class and the working class which means that there are effectively two distinct classes, but they are united by being exploited by capital. The middle class has a relatively privileged situation in terms of better education, white collar occupations and higher income than the working class, but they are still subordinate to the requirements of capital within the relations of production. In this context the possibility of a political alliance between the working class and middle class is created. However, this alliance has often not been established because of apparently different concerns. Sections of the middle-class support causes like the issue of ecological conservation and liberation of oppressed groups, whilst the working class has been more concerned with economic issues. But there is no reason why such diverse concerns cannot be expressed by a single programme of human liberation. In particular the middle class is not indifferent to the issue of enhancing its economic conditions and there is no reason why the working class cannot support progressive causes. Historically the possibility of an alliance of the middle class and working class has only been developed in sporadic circumstances and exceptional conditions. But a distinct layer of the middle class considers that it has a historic connection with the working class and so is motivated to vote for left wing parties. Therefore, it is possible to generate a systematic alliance of the working class and middle class around common objectives, and in this manner advance the possibility of the promotion of the role of a government based on the perspective of social change. Indeed, it could be argued that in advanced capitalist countries it will not be possible to realise change in any other manner.

Will the success of a middle class and working-class coalition amount to a process of genuine revolutionary change? The answer to this question can only be answered to the extent that the domination of the role of capital is undermined and the influence of what have been the subordinated classes becomes more important. Such a development will occur in terms of the role of the gradual combining with the prospect of qualitative change. In this context the success of a minimum programme to defend social conditions, end austerity and regenerate the role of the welfare state, will create the conditions for support for the aim of the realisation of socialism as the logical outcome of these developments. This process means that such a development is likely to occur in terms of the initial election of a left-wing government. But the point is that we should not expect this government to implement ‘socialism from above’. Instead only the mass mobilisation of all sections of working people will generate the political conditions to facilitate the realisation of a process of genuine economic and political change. In this context it is important that the working class develops the confidence that change can occur. This is vital if the influence of reactionary views can be overcome and replaced by mass support for the process of challenging the power of capital. Hence the issue of revolutionary change is not an automatic or instantaneous process but is instead what Gramsci defines as the struggle for hegemony which has profoundly ideological aspects. It is vital that the parties of revolutionary Marxism develop the arguments as to why socialism is the logical outcome of the developing contradictions of capitalism. In all situations these organisations have to indicate that the continuation of capitalism is no longer sufficient to realise the material needs of the people and that instead an alternative type of society will be an improvement and the basis to establish genuine economic prosperity and the advance of society. The success of this perspective will mean increasing support for the aim of socialism and so it will be in that context that a significant number of people will vote for the Labour party in order to facilitate this development. However, if the Marxist parties neglect this task then the result could be the unintended increase in the influence of reactionary and demoralised views such as the popular support for nationalism. It is the present influence of nationalism which indicates that the Marxist organisations have failed to establish a dialogue with the working class and the result is the increasing support for reactionary ideas and opposition to the perspective of the creation of an egalitarian society. The continued inability of the Marxist groups to realise the requirements of the challenges that they have is an indication that the problem of developing genuine class consciousness within the working class and middle class will continue, and in this manner the system of capitalism will be able to maintain its domination over society.

In other words, the central issue is not the character of the working class and its apparent inability to be able to transform society and so establish an alternative to capitalism. Instead it is the problems with developing genuine revolutionary organisations that are able to generate a genuine dialogue with the working class. If this process was to occur the result would be the increased influence of the view that socialism is a credible alternative to capitalism. This creation of an alternative counter-hegemony to that of the ruling class would mean that increasing numbers of people would be inspired by the conception of socialism. They would consciously act to try and realise this objective in terms of establishing alternative forms of social power within capitalist society. But the failure to develop this type of possibility means that bourgeois ideology remains dominant, and so despite the increasing political crisis in societies like the UK people have not become supporters of an alternative type of society. But how is to be possible to develop the increased influence of revolutionary Marxism? In order to address this issue, it is necessary that the groups improve the quality of their propaganda and so make increasingly effective arguments in favour of socialism. They would also need to concern themselves with the general concerns of the workers and middle class. But primarily they would have to be realistic and so admit to the difficulties involved in the possibility of socialism. Hence, they would have to admit that presently the influence of Marxism is minimal and is not likely to change without the success of ideological changes within society. This means that the aspect of a lack of realism in the propaganda of the Marxist organisations has to be rejected and instead they have to admit to the difficulties involved in trying to achieve successful political change. However, the groups are not receptive to these issues because of an inherent sectarianism and elitism, and a general indifference to the importance of theory. This means that the potential for progressive developments is possibly connected to the election of a Corbyn led Labour government. Such a result would increase the morale and confidence of the workers and generate the possibility for the revival of the Marxist groups. In this context the result would be a revival in discussion about ideas to do with socialism and the influence of Marxism would be enhanced. Such developments may encourage the generation of increasingly militant actions by the working class. In this context the dynamics could be created to increase support for the aim of socialism. But ultimately the advance of the realisation of this aim would be connected to the genuine expression of this aspiration in the increasingly ambitious actions of the working class. However, if a Corbyn government is not elected this would not mean the demise of the possibilities to promote the aim of socialism. It would still be necessary to outline how the reactionary Conservative government could not solve the economic problems of society because of its rejection of relations with the EU. In this context it would become apparent that the interests of the people were connected to the retaining of a close connection between the EU and the UK. These changed circumstances would undermine the influence of nationalism on the issue of the EU. In these more complex circumstances, it would be possible to still revive the politics of class struggle. But in any of these eventualities the necessity to revive the influence of Marxism is crucial. Without this possibility the limitations of spontaneous class consciousness may mean that the issue of socialism, or even the importance of the role of class struggle, could be ignored. The point is that the limitations of a Corbyn led Labour government mean that this administration is not sufficient to realise socialism. Only the generation of a relation of the working class with Marxism has the theoretical and political dynamics to promote the required class consciousness that is sufficient in order to create the conditions for the realisation of socialism. In this manner the aim of the realisation of socialism is connected to the extent and importance of the influence of Marxism. But this aspect expresses the relation of Marxism to the role of the working class.