

England on the Global Board: A Marxist Reading from the Material Base to Imperialist Rivalry



From post-Brexit precarious labour to the capitalist world-system: a dialectical reconstruction of England's insertion as a subordinate financial core and the prospects for a socialist refoundation

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I. The Micro Level: Immediate Relations of Production

The Form of Labour in Post-Brexit United Kingdom

Any materialist analysis must start from the **material base** of society: the relations of production – that is, the way human beings organise themselves to produce and reproduce their existence. In the United Kingdom, this base has been profoundly altered by four decades of neoliberalism, accelerated by the 2016 Brexit referendum and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Precarious labour is the dominant form of the labour force. According to a UCL study (2024), 8% of UK workers are “increasingly trapped in precarious work” – this is not a temporary transition towards stable employment, but a **structuralisation of precarity**. Zero-hours contracts, the platform economy (Uber, Deliveroo, Amazon Flex), and subcontracting in sectors such as hospitality, retail and health services have turned the worker into a flexible commodity.

In manufacturing – a sector that accounted for 25% of GDP in 1970 and today barely 8% – **deindustrialisation** has destroyed the traditional class trade unions (miners, steelworkers, textiles). The remaining factories operate with precarious migrant labour, under conditions of work intensification and growing automation. In services, which represent 80% of GDP, **tertiarisation** has generated a mass of call centre, retail, logistics, private healthcare and tech workers whose conditions are characteristic of **structural precarity**: fixed-term contracts, no social rights, rotating shifts and algorithmically measured performance. Real wages in the UK have fallen since 2008, with a widening gap between London (a global financial centre) and the “abandoned north” (former industrial zones).

The Expanded Reproduction of Capital

Marx's general formula of capital – $M-C \dots P \dots C'-M'$ – reproduces itself in the UK with particular intensity. The **privatisation** of public services (water, energy, transport, healthcare, education) has turned common use-values into commodities that the worker must purchase with his or her wage, thereby reducing the real value of labour power.

Debt as discipline is central: unaffordable mortgages for young people, student loans reaching £50,000, consumer credit card debt, and payday loans with interest rates of 1,000% APR. The British worker is, for the most part, a **permanent debtor**, subject to a financial discipline that neutralises combativity. The **destruction of decent work** is evident: trade union density fell from 50% in 1979 to approximately 22-23% in 2024 (TUC data), with further erosion projected. Existing trade unions (Unite, Unison, GMB) are, in the main, **business unions**, focused on defending sectoral privileges and negotiating with the employer, not on articulating class struggle. Thatcher's anti-union legislation (1980s) and Sunak's "minimum service levels" laws (2023) have dismantled the capacity for effective strike action.

II. The Meso Level: Economic Structure and Accumulation

Oligopoly and Concentration of Capital

The British economy is dominated by **oligopolies** that control strategic sectors:

- **Financial system:** The City of London concentrates 40% of global financial activity. Banks such as Barclays, HSBC, Lloyds and NatWest control 85% of bank accounts. The "Big Four" auditors (Deloitte, PwC, EY, KPMG) audit 99% of FTSE 100 companies. Financial surplus value

appropriates productive surplus value through fees, interest and speculation.

- **Energy:** British Gas (Centrica), EDF Energy, E.ON, SSE and ScottishPower control 95% of the retail energy market. Electricity and gas prices have risen by 150% since 2021, while energy company profits have reached record highs. The privatisation of British Gas (1986) and electricity (1990) transferred natural resources from the state to private corporations.
- **Water:** Thames Water, Southern Water, United Utilities and seven other regional monopolies control water supply. The 1989 privatisation has resulted in £72 billion in dividends to shareholders, while infrastructure deteriorates and raw sewage discharges reach record levels. Thames Water's debt exceeds £14 billion.
- **Transport:** Network Rail (state-owned, but with £60 billion debt), and private operators (Avanti West Coast, TransPennine Express, Southeastern) that receive state subsidies while delivering poor services and dividends to shareholders. The privatisation of British Rail (1993-1997) has resulted in the highest train fares in Europe.
- **Healthcare:** The NHS, though theoretically public, is **privatised by the back door**: contracts to private companies (Serco, Virgin Care, Circle Health), PFI (Private Finance Initiative) that indebts hospitals for decades, and a waiting list of 7.6 million patients (2024). The Labour Party's "defence" of the NHS has served, objectively, to legitimise its progressive deterioration.

Brexit and the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall

The **tendency of the rate of profit to fall** – the law described by Marx in *Capital*, Volume III – operates in the UK as a **long-term secular tendency** rooted in the rising organic composition of capital, particularly visible in the deindustrialisation

of the 1970s-1990s. Brexit, however, represents a **conjunctural acceleration** of this tendency through distinct mechanisms:

According to studies by the NBER (2025) and the US Federal Reserve (2025), Brexit has reduced UK GDP by between 6% and 8% by 2025, with investment reduced by 12-18%, employment by 3-4%, and productivity by 3-4%.

These objective data reveal that: - Brexit was not an immediate “shock”, but a **gradual cumulative erosion**. - Prolonged uncertainty reduced business investment. - Trade barriers with the EU (a market for 50% of British exports) increased compliance costs. - Companies relocated investment to the EU (outward FDI increased by 17%). - Food prices with high import dependence from the EU increased by 8 percentage points more than products with low import dependence.

It is crucial to distinguish: the **profit squeeze from Brexit** (conjunctural, political, arising from trade disintegration and supply-chain disruption) from the **structural TRPF** (long-term, rooted in technological change and the rising organic composition). The former accelerated the latter, but they are not identical. British financialisation – the shift from productive to financial accumulation – began in the **1960s with the Eurodollar market**, was consolidated by the **Big Bang of 1986**, and deepened through the neoliberal era. Brexit did not create financialisation; it **accelerated existing tendencies** by reducing profitable outlets in European trade and forcing capital further into speculative circuits.

Faced with falling profitability in the European market, British capital intensified its existing orientation towards **financialisation** (speculation in the City) and **rent extraction** (privatised services, property ownership). The “Global Britain” model promised by the Brexiteers turned out, objectively, to be a **deepening of financial dependence** on Wall Street and the City.

III. The National Level: State, Hegemony and Political Superstructure

The Neoliberal State as a Class Apparatus

The British state, far from being a neutral “parliamentary democracy”, is the **juridical recognition of the supremacy of financial capital**. The unwritten constitution (conventions, common law, Acts of Parliament) allows a flexibility that capital uses to its advantage: rapid legislative changes, privatisation without referendums, and a symbiotic relationship between the Treasury and the City. The state, in its repressive function, guarantees surplus value through: - The **Metropolitan Police** and security forces that protect private property and repress protest (e.g. mass arrests at Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil and pro-Palestinian demonstrations). - The **courts** that criminalise poverty (anti-social behaviour orders, imprisonment for public protection). - The **prison system** that disciplines the surplus population (incarceration rate of 147 per 100,000, the highest in Western Europe).

In its ideological function, the state reproduces hegemony through: - The **BBC** and private media (Sky, ITV, *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Times*) that naturalise the neoliberal order. - The **education system** that selects by social class (private “public schools” such as Eton, Harrow, Westminster versus decaying state academies). - The **think tanks** (Institute of Economic Affairs, Adam Smith Institute, Policy Exchange) that produce “knowledge” functional to capital.

The Hegemony of the Financial Oligarchy

The British ruling class is not an autonomous industrial bourgeoisie, but a **financial oligarchy** articulated with global capital. The families and corporations that control the City (banks, investment funds, hedge funds, private equity)

operate with capital in tax havens (Cayman Islands, Jersey, Guernsey, Isle of Man) and corporate governance structures that escape state control.

This oligarchy exercises hegemony through **consensus**: the idea that the UK is a “country of opportunity”, that individual merit determines success, that “Global Britain” is a world power, that poverty is the fault of the poor. This ideology, disseminated by the media, schools, the monarchy and social networks, constitutes the **ideological apparatus** that neutralises class consciousness.

The Crisis of Hegemony after Brexit

Brexit represented a **fracture in the hegemony** of the British establishment. The division between “Leave” and “Remain” was not merely economic, but **cultural and class-based**: Leave voters concentrated in the abandoned industrial north, impoverished coastal towns, and white working-class sectors who felt their identity threatened by immigration and globalisation. Remain voters concentrated in London, universities, and cosmopolitan professional sectors.

The ruling class response was: - **“Hard” Brexit**: implemented by Johnson (2019-2022), which deepened the rupture with the EU. - **“Austerity 2.0”**: implemented by Sunak (2022-2024), with £30 billion in cuts. - **“National renewal”**: promised by Starmer (2024-present), which objectively reproduces Blairism with a rhetoric of “change”.

The Starmer Government: Return to Blairism

Keir Starmer, elected in July 2024 with a large majority (411 of 650 seats), promised to “stop the chaos” and begin a “decade of national renewal”. However, objective data from his first year reveal:

- **Anemic growth**: GDP grew just 0.1% in 2024, with forecasts of stagnation for 2025.
- **Persistent inflation**: above the Bank of England’s 2% target.

- **NHS waiting list:** 7.6 million patients, with no significant reduction.
- **Immigration:** 37,000 migrants arrived in small boats in the year to April 2026, 17% more than when Labour took power.
- **Government approval:** fell from -47 in January 2025 to -57 in May 2026, a level similar to that of the Conservative government before it lost the election.

Starmer's May 2025 speech on immigration adopted a hardline tone that drew comparisons to Enoch Powell's 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech from commentators and activists. The *New Statesman* analysis concluded that the speech "failed", reducing support for left-wing parties by 1.5 percentage points. Objectively, the Starmer government represents: - **Return to Blairism:** fiscal austerity, immigration control, alignment with the US, maintenance of the neoliberal model. - **Continuity of the subsidising state:** covert privatisation of the NHS, maintenance of academy schools, defence of property ownership. - **Reproduction of capitalist hegemony:** institutional management that neutralises any attempt at structural transformation.

IV. The Regional Level: Europe and the International Division of Labour

The United Kingdom as a Subordinate Financial Core

In the international division of labour, the UK occupies a **specific and contradictory position**: it is a **financial centre** (the City) but a **productive periphery within the core** (manufacturing destroyed, dependent on imports). This is not the periphery of the world-system in the Wallersteinian sense (like Bangladesh or Bolivia), but a **subordinate financial core** or **semi-peripheral financial hub**: a rentier economy that captures financial surplus from global

transactions while its working population suffers wage stagnation and its productive base atrophies.

This ambiguity is functional to capital: the UK is the “**bridge**” between US and European capital, capturing financial rent from global transactions while its working population suffers wage stagnation.

The reality is: - **Export of financial services**: 40% of global financial activity passes through London. - **Import of consumer goods**: from the EU, China and the rest of the world. - **Deteriorated terms of trade**: the price of service exports grows more slowly than the price of goods and energy imports. - **Energy dependence**: import of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Qatar and the US, after the break with Russian gas and the EU.

The “Global Britain” Trap

The “Global Britain” promised by the Brexiteers turned out, objectively, to be a **deepening of dependence**: - Free trade agreements with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore: marginal benefits for the British economy. - No trade deal was reached with the US (Trump II’s priority is “America First”). - The relationship with the EU is one of **asymmetric subordination**: the UK follows EU rules to export (sanitary, phytosanitary, rules of origin), but without a say in their making. - British “independence” is, in practice, **unilateral dependence** on global markets.

NATO and the “Special Relationship” with the US

The UK is the **US’s closest ally in Europe**, beyond the EU. The “special relationship” is materialised in: - **AUKUS** (2021): trilateral agreement with the US and Australia for nuclear submarines, excluding France. The UK buys US technology, assuming costs of £40 billion. - **NATO**: the UK spends 2.3% of GDP

on defence (NATO's target), with plans to increase to 2.5%. British armed forces are the second largest contributor to NATO after the US. - **Intelligence sharing**: the "Five Eyes" agreement (US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) for intelligence exchange. - **Military bases**: the UK maintains bases in Cyprus, Diego Garcia, the Falklands, and participates in US operations in the Middle East.

This alignment is not free: the UK obtains **preferential access** to US military technology, intelligence and financial markets, in exchange for **strategic subordination** in foreign policy. The Starmer government has deepened this alignment, supporting Ukraine, condemning Russia, and maintaining hostility towards China.

V. The International Level: The Capitalist World-System and Imperialist Rivalry

The Transition from Unipolarity to Multipolarity

The 21st century is characterised by the **transition from a unipolar order (dominated by the US) to a multipolar system** in which China, Russia, India and regional blocs compete for influence. For the UK, this transition presents **risks and opportunities**:

- **Risk**: the relative decline of the US could leave the UK without its main ally, while the EU (its closest market) strengthens itself as an autonomous bloc.
- **Opportunity**: multipolarity could allow the UK to diversify its alliances, though the "special relationship" with the US makes this option difficult.

The Trump II administration has made explicit a “**New Security Strategy**” that redefines US foreign policy with a “hard power” approach: containment of China, immigration control, trade tariffs, and a demand for total alignment. The UK, with its “centre-left” Starmer government, is particularly exposed to this pressure, having abandoned European equidistance.

The United Kingdom as a Strategic Territory

The UK is, for imperialist rivalry, a **strategic territory** for multiple reasons: - **City of London**: a global financial centre, competitor to Wall Street and Frankfurt. - **Trident nuclear submarines**: base at Faslane (Scotland), part of NATO’s nuclear deterrent, using US missile technology. - **AUKUS**: nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) for the Indo-Pacific, strengthening NATO’s presence in Asia. - **Intelligence**: GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) as part of the “Five Eyes”. - **Diego Garcia**: military base in the Indian Ocean, leased to the US but under British sovereignty.

It is essential to distinguish between **formal sovereignty** (legal ownership) and **real sovereignty** (capacity for independent policy). The UK’s “strategic territory” is valuable *to the US*, not as an expression of British autonomy. Diego Garcia operates as a US base; Trident depends on US missile systems; AUKUS involves purchasing US technology. This is **vassal state utility**, not great power status. The “competition” for these resources does not benefit the British people: it turns them into an **arena of rivalry** where transnational capital pressures for concessions, while the local state loses sovereignty.

VI. The Structural Contradiction and the Socialist Perspective

The Principal Contradiction

The principal contradiction of contemporary Britain is the one Marx identified in *Capital*: between the **productive forces** (the potential for sovereign development, technological wealth, skilled labour power) and the **capitalist relations of production** (private ownership of the means of production, extraction of surplus value, subordination to the global market and to the City).

This contradiction is expressed in: - **Crisis of overproduction and underconsumption**: the City generates financial wealth that does not translate into well-being for the population. - **Ecological crisis**: dependence on fossil fuels, privatisation of energy, and resistance to energy transition. - **Crisis of legitimacy**: parliamentary democracy cannot resolve the material contradictions, generating disaffection, Brexit as a protest vote, and the rise of Reform UK.

The Task: Socialisation of the Means of Production

Socialist refoundation requires the **socialisation of the means of production**, not as bureaucratic state ownership, but as **community and democratic management**: - **Nationalisation of water, energy, transport and postal services**: not to generate state rent, but to plan their use according to social and ecological needs. - **Socialisation of banking**: banks as a public service, not as speculators. - **Democratic municipalisation of healthcare, transport, and education**: not state re-centralisation, but community autonomy in the management of services. - **Ecological planning**: the economy oriented towards the satisfaction of needs within planetary boundaries.

The Historical Subject

The historical subject of transformation is a **class alliance** that articulates: - The **working class** (formal and informal wage-earners, NHS workers, retail, logistics, residual manufacturing). - **Migrant communities** (Afro-Caribbean, South Asian, Eastern European), whose precarity is an expression of the structural contradiction. - **Popular sectors** (social housing, universities, climate movements), whose struggle is also a struggle against extractivism. - **Anti-imperialist currents**, who understand that national sovereignty is inseparable from socialist transformation.

The party is not external to this subject but its **organic expression**: the instrument through which dispersed struggles gain coordination, historical memory, and strategic orientation. As Gramsci argued, the party is the “**collective intellectual**” that emerges from the class’s own experience, not an elite imposed upon it. This preserves Lenin’s insight that the party must be “**at the head**” of the movement – not because it possesses transcendent wisdom, but because it concentrates and systematises the practical knowledge generated in struggle.

VI-A. Structural Foundations of Stagnation: Why the British Communist Parties Cannot Advance

The Theoretical Starting Point

To understand why the British communist parties remain trapped in the **stage of cadre parties** —hundreds or thousands of members, without organic presence in mass trade unions, territories or grassroots social movements— it is necessary to apply the materialist historical method. It is not enough to point to

organisational fragmentation; one must investigate the **objective contradictions** that prevent the transition to the stage of a **mass party** of hundreds of thousands of militants.

1. The Historical Underestimation of Capitalism's Resilience

As Ben Harker documents in *The Chronology of Revolution* (2021), one central cause of the original CPGB's failure —and by extension that of its fragmented successors— was the **persistent underestimation of capitalism's capacity for resilience**, especially welfare state capitalism. The British communist parties operated for decades under the Leninist assumption that “imperialism is the highest (and final) stage of capitalism”, which generated an ongoing expectation of an imminent final crisis. When this expectation failed to materialise time and again, it produced two devastating consequences:

- **Underdevelopment of concrete economic analysis:** Instead of elaborating a detailed theory of the specificities of British capitalism —its early financialisation, its capacity to integrate the working class through the welfare state, its institutional flexibility— the parties took refuge in general formulas about the “general crisis of capitalism”.
- **Shift towards voluntarism:** When the crisis did not arrive, the tendency was to blame the “lack of consciousness” of the masses or the “betrayal” of reformist leaders, rather than to analyse why the system maintained its legitimacy among broad popular sectors.

This theoretical inadequacy —the inability to explain why British workers did not turn towards the communist party— generated a **vicious circle of sectarianism**: the party, failing to understand the real mediations of bourgeois power in Britain, responded by hardening its rhetoric and isolating its practice.

However, this theoretical failure was itself **rooted in material conditions**: the post-war class compromise (Butskellism, welfare state, imperial privilege) materially integrated the British working class into capitalist hegemony in ways that made communist advance structurally difficult, not merely intellectually challenging.

2. The Absence of a Strategic Theory of the Democratic-Bourgeois State

The second great deficit is the **lack of deep analysis of the structures of the democratic-bourgeois state as a form of class domination in the West**, and the failure to translate such analysis into effective political strategy. While in Tsarist Russia the party could aspire to storm the state through insurrection, in Britain—with centuries of parliamentary tradition, a consolidated two-party system (Labour-Tory duopoly), and a working class organised largely around the Labour Party—the classical insurrectionary strategy was inapplicable.

The CPGB never resolved this contradiction: - In the 1920s it attempted affiliation with the Labour Party, but was expelled in 1924 and definitively in 1926. - Between 1927 and 1931, under the “class against class” line imposed by the Comintern, the CPGB broke completely with Labour, fielding candidates against Labour candidates and defining the Labour Party as “the third capitalist party”.

This sectarian tactic had disastrous results: in 1929, with 25 candidates, the communist vote barely exceeded 50,000, similar to the 1924 result with only 8 candidates. - From 1935 onwards, with the Popular Front, the CPGB returned to collaboration with Labour, but without a clear strategic analysis of how to transform that collaboration into the construction of alternative power. - From the 1960s onward, the CPGB developed Eurocommunist and Gramscian analyses of the democratic state (e.g., through theorists such as Monty Johnstone and the

Marxism Today circle), but this theoretical turn came **too late** to reverse the party's decline, and was itself a response to —rather than a cause of— the labour movement's defeat.

This oscillation between **sectarianism and dissolution** —two sides of the same inability to elaborate a united tactic that preserves political independence without isolating itself from the masses— has become structurally inscribed in the British communist tradition. The current parties (CPB, CPGB-ML, NCP, RCP) repeat this pattern: they either integrate uncritically into Labour (as the CPB did in supporting Corbyn and now fields no candidates of its own) or isolate themselves in a revolutionary purity that does not connect with the real social base (as with the CPGB-ML).

The critical point is that the CPGB's theoretical deficit was not absolute absence but **political failure**: the analysis existed (particularly from the 1960s Eurocommunist turn), but it could not overcome the **material defeat of the labour movement in 1984-85** (the miners' strike) and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union.

3. The Underdevelopment of the Analysis of “Civil Society” as a Class Trench

The third structural deficit, the most significant for Gramsci, is the **tendency of the British communist parties to underestimate and under-analyse “culture” or civil society as a site of class power and its reproduction in developed societies.**

Paradoxically, as Harker notes, while the CPGB leadership considered culture secondary, the party was **more successful in the cultural sphere than in the strict political one**: communists such as Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson,

Raphael Samuel transformed British historiography; scientists like J.D. Bernal influenced post-war science policy; communist architects participated in public housing reconstruction; and in 1949 there were **2,000 communist-affiliated teachers**, the party's largest professional cohort.

However, this success in “civil society” did not translate into political power because: - **It was not articulated strategically**: cultural activity was perceived as a “secondary arena”, not as a central terrain of hegemonic struggle. - **No lasting alternative institutions were built**: unlike the French or Italian communist parties, which developed a dense network of mass organisations (trade unions, cooperatives, press, schools, cultural centres), the CPGB maintained an extremely light structure, dependent on the individual loyalty of its intellectual members. - **When the party did understand the importance of civil society—in the 1960s and 1970s—it was “too late”** to reverse its decline. The current parties have inherited this weakness.

The CPB has a token presence in academia and the media; the smaller groups lack any cultural infrastructure whatsoever. None have managed to build the **Gramscian “trenches”** that would allow them to compete hegemonically in British civil society.

4. Fragmentation as an Expression of the Crisis of Leadership

The existence of **at least seven organisations that claim to be communist** — CPB, CPGB-ML, NCP, RCPB(ML), CPGB (new), RCP, plus other Trotskyist groups— is not an accident, but the **organic expression of the inability to build a collective leadership**.

This fragmentation produces concretely devastating effects: - **Dispersion of resources**: scarce militancy divided among multiple apparatuses, each with its

own press, premises, meetings. - **Inability to have electoral impact**: under the British first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, left-wing votes are split among multiple candidates, guaranteeing electoral irrelevance. The CPB obtained less than 0.01% of the vote in 2019. - **Confusion among workers**: a radicalised worker seeking to join a communist party faces an incomprehensible menu of acronyms, which favours abstention or refuge in the Labour Party. - **Inability to negotiate with Labour from a position of strength**: fragmentation allows Labour systematically to ignore the communists, because there is no single organisation that can credibly offer or withdraw electoral support.

The root of this fragmentation is itself structural: **the absence of a tradition of effective democratic centralism**. Each split has reproduced the same pattern—mutual accusations of revisionism, sectarianism or betrayal—without dispute resolution mechanisms that stop short of organisational rupture.

5. The “Labour Party Trap”: Between Absorption and Irrelevance

The **Labour Party** constitutes the main structural obstacle to the development of a mass communist party in Britain. As an analysis by the transform! network (2025) notes, Labour is a “**bourgeois workers’ party**” (in the Leninist terminology), where the leadership is bourgeois while the rank and file remains predominantly working class.

This duality generates an **irresolvable contradiction for communists**: - **If they integrate into Labour** (as the CPB does, having supported Corbyn and now fielding no candidates of its own), they are diluted into an organisation that, under Starmer, has explicitly returned to austerity, immigration control and alignment with the US. The CPB loses its political independence without gaining any capacity to influence Labour’s leadership. - **If they stay outside Labour** (as

CPGB-ML, NCP, RCP do), they are confined to a **sectarian ghetto**, without access to the organised working-class base in the unions affiliated to Labour. None of the current organisations has achieved the **strategic synthesis** that some sectors of the original CPGB attempted in the 1940s-50s: working within the mass organisations of the labour movement (unions, cooperatives, neighbourhood movements) while maintaining an independent political organisation with its own programme and discipline.

The challenge is not simply to choose between entryism and sectarianism, but to develop **concrete mechanisms for mass work within Labour-affiliated structures while preserving political independence**: - **Rank-and-file reform movements** within existing unions (UNITE, UNISON, RMT, CWU, BFAWU) - **Militant caucuses** in trade union branches that maintain revolutionary perspectives - **Community organising** in working-class neighbourhoods that connects with Labour-voting populations without subordinating to Labour Party machinery - **Base-building in non-affiliated unions** (RMT, ASLEF, PCS) where political independence is more achievable.

This requires a **dual-track strategy**: independent party-building *and* systematic engagement with the only mass working-class organisations that exist in Britain.

6. The Generational Problem: Ageing Militancy and Youth Disconnection

A fourth structural factor, exacerbated by fragmentation, is the **ageing of communist militancy** and the inability to attract new generations. Available data indicate that the average age of CPB members exceeds 60; the smaller organisations (CPGB-ML, NCP) have an even older profile.

The causes are multiple: - **Failure to digitalise**: while the far right (Reform UK) and environmental movements (Green Party) have used social media to mobilise young people, the communist parties maintain communication structures anchored in print media and physical rallies. - **Disconnection from new forms of precarity**: the language of the “industrial working class” (miners, steelworkers, textiles) no longer speaks to platform workers, delivery drivers, logistics, call centres or privatised healthcare workers. Most British communist parties have not renewed their analysis of the contemporary class composition. - **Stigma of “Stalinism”**: in British youth culture, strongly influenced by an education system that presents the USSR as totalitarian, the label “communist” carries a negative symbolic weight that none of the current organisations has managed to reverse with an attractive cultural offer.

The exception is the **Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP, 2024)** , which has achieved some penetration in the university world through novel tactics (campus campaigns, selling press at cultural events, connecting with youth anti-capitalist movements). However, its impact remains limited (a few hundred members, based on public estimates) and its strategy has not yet demonstrated an ability to translate university enthusiasm into territorial roots in working-class neighbourhoods.

Conclusion of the Structural Analysis

The British communist parties remain in **stage 1 (cadre party)** because of a combination of objective and subjective factors that reinforce each other:

Dimension	Central Problem	Effect on Stage
Theoretical	Underestimation of capitalist resilience; absence of a theory of	Inability to elaborate a medium-term strategy

Dimension	Central Problem	Effect on Stage
	the democratic state	
Strategic	Oscillation between sectarianism and dissolution into Labour	Impossibility of building independence with a mass base
Cultural	Underdevelopment of the analysis of civil society	Absence of lasting hegemonic trenches
Organisational	Fragmentation into multiple parties	Dispersion of resources, electoral irrelevance
Generational	Ageing membership, youth disconnection	Inability to reproduce organically

So long as these structural deficits are not resolved —not through statements of principle, but through **systematic strategic work** in the unions, territories, universities and social movements— the British communist parties will remain **testimonial organisations**, incapable of articulating the social majority necessary for socialist transformation.

Refoundation will not begin in the central committees, but in the **factories, neighbourhoods, assemblies of precarious workers and migrant struggles** —where the class exists and fights, even if the parties have not yet learned to accompany it.

VII. Social Organisation and Political Vehicles: The British Communist Parties

Theoretical Bases of Marxism-Leninism

Marx, in the Provisional Rules of the First International (1864):

“That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.”

Yet this thesis does not imply the abandonment of the party. Marx himself fought against the English trade unionists and French Proudhonians who rejected political action. “Proletarian autonomy” meant having **“its own political instrument based on its consciousness and its programme”**.

Lenin, in *What Is To Be Done?* (1903):

“It seems that no one has yet doubted that the strength of the contemporary movement lies in the awakening of the masses (and, above all, of the industrial proletariat), and its weakness in the lack of consciousness and initiative among the revolutionary leaders.”

Lenin developed the conception of the party as an **“organised vanguard”** that **“marches at the front”** of the class. The ultimate goal is the **“mass party, of hundreds of thousands and millions, present in all the mass organisms”**. The party is a **“living organism”** that grows with the movement, not a static structure.

Stalin, in *The Foundations of Leninism* (1924):

“The Party is the vanguard detachment of the working class... The Party must march at the head of the working class, must see further than the working class, must lead the proletariat and not drag behind the spontaneous movement.”

But Stalin also specified:

“The Party is not only the highest form of class association for the proletarians, but is, at the same time, an instrument of the proletariat for the conquest of its dictatorship.”

The key is: the party is an **instrument**, not an end in itself. It is the **highest form of organisation**, not a substitute for the class. It is a **vanguard that leads**, not an elite that replaces.

Gramsci, in the *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935), offers the crucial corrective:

“The political party is the first cell in which the collective will begins to take shape.”

The party as “**collective intellectual**” —not external to the class but emerging from its practical activity, systematising its experience, and orienting its strategy. This bridges the apparent contradiction between “class alliance” and “vanguard party”: the party is the organic expression of the class’s own self-organisation, concentrated and coordinated.

The British Communist Parties: A Genealogy of Fragmentation

The United Kingdom presents a particular case of **party fragmentation** that illustrates the crisis of the revolutionary left in Western Europe:

1. CPGB (Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1991)

Founded by Lenin in 1920, with Comintern support. It peaked in 1943: 60,000 members, 2 MPs (1945), 500,000 votes in local elections (1946). It controlled the mineworkers’ union (NUM), had influence in the steel industry, and published the *Daily Worker* (later the *Morning Star*).

History: - 1956: crisis after the Hungarian invasion; loss of one third of members.
- 1960s-70s: eurocommunism; gradual abandonment of the Soviet line; development of Gramscian analysis of the democratic state. - 1980s: support for “new left”, feminism, environmentalism; loss of working-class base. - 1984-85: failure to lead or effectively support the miners’ strike, a decisive material defeat.
- 1991: dissolved after the collapse of the USSR; rebranded as Democratic Left (1991), then a think-tank (1998).

2. CPB (Communist Party of Britain, 1988-present)

Split from the CPGB over the dispute about the *Morning Star* and the PPPS (People’s Press Printing Society). Claims Marxism-Leninism, but with “revision”: support for Jeremy Corbyn (2015-2020), integration into the Labour Party, and limited electoral participation.

Social base: limited. No significant presence in mass unions. No MPs. No territorial control.

3. CPGB-ML (Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist), 2004)

Split from the Socialist Labour Party (Arthur Scargill). Anti-revisionist, pro-Stalin, pro-DPRK. Criticisms: support for Brexit (nationalist position), transphobic positions (as seen by some), international isolation.

Social base: minimal. No presence in unions. No territorial presence.

4. NCP (New Communist Party of Britain, 1977)

Split from the CPGB in opposition to eurocommunism. Anti-revisionist. Publishes *The New Worker*. Minimal social base.

5. RCPB(ML) (Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist), 1979)

Split from the CPGB. Hoxhaist (pro-Albania). Marginal social base.

6. CPGB (new, 2004)

Trotskyist (ex-Militant/Socialist Appeal). Publishes *Weekly Worker*. Claims “communist fusion”. Operates as “Labour Party Marxists”, trying to influence Labour from within.

7. RCP (Revolutionary Communist Party, 2025)

Ex-IMT/Socialist Appeal. Trotskyist. Publishes *The Communist*. Recent relaunch after a split from the IMT.

Objective Analysis: Cadre Parties without Mass Parties

According to Leninist theory, the revolutionary party goes through stages:

1. **Cadre party**: hundreds/thousands of members, vertical structure, intensive ideological formation.
2. **Mass party**: hundreds of thousands/millions, present in unions, territories, social movements.
3. **Effective leadership**: the party is “at the head” of the mass organisms, not absent from them.

All current British communist parties are in stage 1, without having moved to stage 2. The historical CPGB (1920-1991) reached stage 2 in 1943-1946, but fell back to stage 1 after 1956 and dissolved in 1991. This constitutes, objectively, a **deviation from the Leninist model of party building**.

The Dichotomy of the British Left

- **Labour Party** (post-Blair, post-Corbyn, post-Starmer): a mass party with a social base (unions, territories, voters). But it has abandoned the revolutionary perspective; it is integrated into the institutional and capitalist system. Corbyn (2015-2020) represented an attempt at radicalisation from within, defeated by the party establishment. Starmer (2024-present)

represents the return to Blairism: austerity, immigration control, alignment with the US and therefore imperialism.

- **CPB**: maintains an ML perspective but with a limited social base; integrated into Labour.
- **CPGB-ML/NCP/RCPB(ML)**: maintain a revolutionary perspective but lack an organised social base.
- **CPGB (new)/RCP**: Trotskyists, try to influence Labour, but without their own social base.
- **Conclusion**: the British left oscillates between reformist betrayal (Labour) and sectarian isolation (the ML parties). The challenge is to break this dichotomy: to build a mass party with a revolutionary perspective.

The Leninist Task

According to Lenin (*What Is To Be Done?*, 1903) and Stalin (*Foundations of Leninism*, 1924): - The party must be **“at the head of the unions, factories, schools, neighbourhood associations”**. - The goal: **“mass party, of hundreds of thousands and millions, present in all the mass organisms”**. - The party is a **“living organism”** that grows with the movement; not a static structure. - Democratic centralism is an **organisational method**, not an immutable dogma. - Tactics must be **flexible**: alliances, electoral participation, insurrection, according to the correlation of forces. - Party leadership must **emanate from the base**, not be imposed from the top.

For the British communist parties, this objectively means: **move from a cadre party to a mass party, while maintaining the revolutionary perspective**.

VIII. Conclusion: Towards Refoundation

The breakthrough of Reform UK in the 2025 local elections —gaining approximately 600 councillors and establishing significant presence in former Labour heartlands— and the rise of Nigel Farage as a central political figure, closes a political circle and opens a new phase of the contradiction. The neoliberal model, imposed by Thatcher and administered by Blair, Brown, Cameron, May, Johnson, Sunak and now Starmer, has exhausted its capacity for legitimation. The far right offers not a solution, but **nationalist and xenophobic escalation**.

The institutional left, represented by Starmer's failure, has demonstrated its structural inability to transform the model from within the state.

Socialist refoundation is not utopia, but **historical necessity** derived from the contradictions of British capitalism: financial dependence, deindustrialisation, extreme precarity, ecological crisis, loss of real sovereignty. The objective conditions exist; what is missing is subjective articulation.

The National Question

Any refoundation must confront the **multinational character of the British state**. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland possess distinct political economies, labour movement traditions, and national questions. The rise of the SNP, the demand for Scottish independence, the particularities of Welsh mining communities, and the unresolved colonial legacy in Northern Ireland cannot be subsumed under an undifferentiated “British” analysis. England itself —the largest and most politically dominant nation— requires specific analysis distinct from the UK as a whole. The current fragmentation of the communist left is reproduced at the national level: there is no coherent strategy for either **federal**

socialist transformation or **independent socialist construction** in the constituent nations.

Gender, Race and the Class Composition

The “historical subject” cannot be analysed abstractly. The British working class is **racialised and gendered** in its very structure: - **Care work** (NHS, social care, childcare) is disproportionately performed by migrant women and women of colour, under conditions of super-exploitation that the traditional “male industrial worker” paradigm obscures. - **Zero-hours contracts** disproportionately affect women workers, particularly in retail, hospitality and social care. - **Platform work** (Uber, Deliveroo, Amazon Flex) draws heavily on migrant labour, where immigration status becomes a mechanism of hyper-precarisation. - The **racialisation of housing** (discrimination in private renting, disproportionate exposure to unsafe cladding, concentration in social housing with poor maintenance) structures working-class experience along racial lines.

These are not “add-ons” to class analysis but **constitutive dimensions** of the contemporary British capitalist labour process. Any party that fails to centre these contradictions will remain irrelevant to the actual working class.

Concrete Strategic Priorities

The task ahead is to **build a new social majority** that articulates the popular sectors, migrant communities, feminism, environmentalism, trade unionism and anti-imperialist currents, in a project that combines:

1. **Social organisation** (working class + migrant communities + organised popular sectors).
2. **Political vehicle** (a vanguard party that articulates, coordinates, represents, but does **NOT** substitute).
3. **Historical project** (socialisation of the means of production, democratic planning, sovereignty, proletarian internationalism, political ecology).

This requires **concrete organisational mechanisms**, not rhetorical calls:

- **Rank-and-file reform movements** within existing unions (building on initiatives like Enough is Enough, but with revolutionary political content)
- **Tenants' union building** (supporting and radicalising existing organisations like ACORN and the London Renters Union)
- **Migrant workers' centres** (modelled on the National Domestic Workers Alliance in the US, providing legal support, political education, and organising infrastructure)
- **Climate-justice workplace organising** (transition councils that connect environmental demands with workers' control over the transition process)
- **Community assemblies in deindustrialised territories** (the “abandoned north”, coastal towns, post-industrial Wales and Scotland) that combine immediate survival organising with political education
- **Digital organising infrastructure** that can compete with Reform UK and the Green Party for youth attention, moving beyond print newspapers to podcast networks, social media collectives, and encrypted organising platforms

According to historical materialism: - Without social organisation, the vehicle becomes bureaucracy or sect (the case of the current British ML parties). - Without a political vehicle, organisation disperses and is co-opted (the case of post-Brexit social movements). - Without a historical project, both become reformist management (the case of the Labour Party).

The British communist parties illustrate the crisis of the European left: **maintaining revolutionary orthodoxy without a social base is as inadequate as reformist betrayal with a social base.** Refoundation requires that the vanguard party **does not renounce its leadership role**, but that this leadership is exercised **FROM and FOR the class**, not **OVER and WITHOUT the class**.

The party must be the instrument of the class; the class must be the motor of the party. Revolution is not a punctual insurrection, but **long-term construction of power**.

The United Kingdom, cradle of industrial capitalism and imperialism, can become—if its peoples so decide—a **laboratory for the transition to 21st-century socialism**. Not as a replica of past models, but as an original experiment that combines the socialisation of the means of production, radical democracy, proletarian internationalism and political ecology, in a European and global articulation that breaks with financial dependence and builds a civilisational alternative for Europe and the world.

The socialist revolution of the 21st century is, above all, **a revolution of the productive forces freed from the chains of capital**. And that liberation begins, not in the central committees of the parties, but in the assemblies of the workers, in the migrant communities, in the schools of the students, in the abandoned territories of the north. The party—any party—will only be useful when it is the instrument of that liberation, not its obstacle.

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