Pluralist Socialism after Corbyn, COVID-19, and Conservatism

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Communism may seem a strange place to start looking from the UK at politics, after 13 years of Conservative rule and under Keir Starmer’s leadership of opposition Labour. But lessons can be drawn from attempts at building alternative societies.

Society-wide a classless society is out of reach in the foreseeable future and a stateless society not what we need, as I will discuss. But communism is also about collective ownership and greater economic equality. It need not take a totalistic form and local pools of communism abound under capitalism, even if they don’t always see themselves that way. The centralised form communism took when attempted teaches us that democratic and inclusive social ownership is a better way to go. Furthermore, much can be done under capitalism to prefigure socialism. We need not resign ourselves to either social democratic change within capitalism or revolution as the sole possibilities.

Social democrats have, in fact, ended up dismantling social democracy, public ownership being replaced by privatisation, equality by inclusion. The cooperatives of cooperative socialism maintain communistic structures at micro-level that make the case for socialism through deed as much as words, showing it can work as much as telling so.

Democratic socialism

Another tradition, democratic socialism, is more democratic than attempts at communism, more geared to socialism than social democracy, and more society-wide and oriented to the state than cooperative socialism. At the same time, it can encompass instances of communism and cooperative socialism, and is compatible with social democracy, but pursuing that as making steps to socialism as well as modifying capitalism.

There was a revival of democratic socialism under austerity. Public ownership came back into mainstream political debate. But it became seen as being inclusive of more than the state and managers, also incorporating workers, consumers, and the community in democratic participation. Alongside state ownership there is a role for local municipal ownership and independent coops. At a time when political control of the BBC is a concern, there is an alternative to state control of the media on one hand and private corporate media on the other. This can be a democratic media (see chapter 13 here) owned or controlled by a range of interests that make up the public. The same can be applied to tech so the public choose whether their data is used and, if so, for what.

More internationally and radically there has been the inclusion of citizens in decision-making on matters such as budgeting, and pyramidal structures of confederal and delegate democracy, with gender equality enshrined. Cases the left can learn from have been found in Fatsa, Rojava, Chiapas, Barcelona, Marinaleda, and participatory budgeting.
internationally. Rather than making an alternative to the state, these democratise the state, and in doing so re legitimise it to the people it empowers. The state must stay to tackle urgent crises like climate change that need radical and fast action. It can also ensure universalism and equality across society.

There is no reason for conservatives in the Labour Party to be frightened of these approaches. Democracy is, well, democratic and for the public. Public ownership has popular support, even amongst voters for the right. It diverts profits from shareholders to the public coffers to be used for the people. Equality can be appealing to those who become more equal. In a society where inequalities are increasingly between wealthy billionaires and the rest, as much as about income and between the middle and working classes, this covers a lot of people.

Community wealth building is spreading round the world at municipal level. Institutions anchored in the community such as local government, universities, hospitals, and the police outsource services to the community and especially co-ops. This keeps wealth locally for the people rather than being lost to distant shareholders, and as much as possible for socially owned business which is democratic. Outsourcing is made conditional on business pursuing policies such as a living wage so lifting people out of poverty. Emissions reductions can be a procurement policy requirement and community wealth building can help with the transition to a green economy. It is good for health and happiness.

These objectives are achieved without appropriation of property from private owners or tax increases. So conservative social democrats have nothing to fear from the approach. At the same time the weight in the economy shifts from private to social ownership and so alters the balance of power. As such, community wealth building has real socialist implications and brings equality of both wealth and income. Community wealth building locally can be supported by national government, scaled up to national level, and built into international trade and development policy.

Social alternatives

Keir Starmer is keen to portray Labour as tough on crime and outdoing the Conservatives on this. He’s been advised this will sway swing voters. But, based on his history, it seems it’s also because he believes in it. Yet knowledge from elsewhere internationally suggests that there are better ways to deal with crime than punishment and crime-fighting policing. Global South, decolonial, and indigenous traditions pursue a human rather than punitive approach, about mediation and resolution rather than adversarial and penal. They aim to prevent crime rather than tackle it after the fact, and heal injuries and restore rather than retribution. Alternative policing involves officers working with the community to spot and tackle bases for crime, building community and conflict resolution as much as crime fighting.

This approach may seem a tough ask for Keir Starmer. But Global North countries are mainstreaming such approaches that can reduce the human and economic costs of a large prison population and prevent crime, all desirable wins for conservative social democracy. Alternatives to conventional punishment and policing are run through with concerns about
racism, and the cooperative tradition mentioned above is combined with anti-racism in initiatives like Cooperation Jackson and the Cleveland Model.

After COVID-19, working less has gained appeal for many. People were won over to slow living, enabled by changes to work patterns amongst other things. Slow is an alternative to the fast short-attention society, allowing greater depth and connection. Direct payments during furloughs and in response to energy costs, and four-day week experiments, provide a precedent for a basic income to support working less. More time off work makes active citizenship more possible, important if the democratic economy is to enfranchise groups beyond workers and managers.

Less work allows more time for family and care. However, lockdowns also showed the dangers of confinement to the family for many, and the importance of communal forms of living and mutual aid. The relevance of the commune or intentional community as an alternative form of living beyond family units came more into sight, especially for women and LGBT+ people. What may seem wacky to many – communal living – has been made more pertinent by recent events. Whatever living set-up you prefer, people need a home and Marinaleda and Co-operation Jackson, amongst others, emphasise co-operative affordable housing.

The importance of public education for safeguarding and equality became more obvious under COVID when children spent long spells at home. But there are alternative approaches to education. Free schools stress learning outside the classroom, for instance in play and democratic participation in school government, and self-development as well as academic achievement. Freirean approaches are influential, emphasising education as dialogue rather than didactics, starting with students’ real worlds as much as external curricula.

There is alternative education outside the public system. Free universities don’t require formal qualifications from teachers or students, so opening education up to the excluded, the curriculum more democratically decided than determined by elites and the powerful. There are no tuition fees, so breaking with the marketisation of universities that have descended into competition, quantification, bullying, and a culture of anxiety. There are disestablished schools in places like Chiapas and Rojava that draw on indigenous knowledge, focused on issues to the fore for ordinary people, such as degrowth and gender equality.

**Global challenges**

Climate change is the major emergency facing the world, and so also any future Starmer government. Fast and radical solutions are needed. Global agreements seem limited. But it is inconceivable that the problem can be tackled without strong state action, via green new deals (that can appeal to different groups Labour needs support from) where relevant and degrowth where possible. In the Global South social reproduction is done at community levels, by people working with their own local environment, so needing to preserve that sustainably. Indigenous knowledge there is a better guide than policy established from outside. So, what is required is state action combined with eco-localism.
So, globally decolonialism is required, for the environment and in areas such as education and justice, as mentioned above. More open borders give people freedom and are equalising. We should have free movement for reasons of obligations and responsibility to others. International migration boosts economies and employment and so also tax revenue for the public sector. Contact between groups in diverse societies has been shown to increase tolerance and integration. And the young and educated, who over time will make up more and more of the population, are more disposed to immigration than older generations. So, politicians can build on such bases for supporting international migration and win elections. Anti-immigration rhetoric from politicians is often seen in terms of who it appeals to, but less so who it alienates, or how people may be persuaded by a narrative of compassion and friendship. This, instead of a call for more efficient rejection, can be applied to examples such as the tragedy of small boat refugees.

**Pluralist Socialism**

What I have described goes beyond dichotomies and polarisation. Social democracy can achieve changes within capitalism but also stepping stones and demonstrations of alternatives that can pave the way to greater socialism. Cooperative socialism can co-exist and be combined with state action, needed for equality, wider community, and to tackle urgent crises like climate change. Yet, localism based in community knowledge provides a long-term approach to sustainability, wealth building, crime, and education. So, different left approaches and levels are combined in pluralist socialism – rather than seen as opposed or alternatives to one another.

What I have discussed combines socialism with ecology, intersectionality, and decolonialism. Attempts at socialism or communism have been characterised by intolerance of alternatives within. So, socialism needs to be more pluralist and liberal. Socialism should not adopt liberalism. Socialism can do liberalism better than liberalism, using social ownership and equality to support freedom and equal distributions of it. But, while not adopting liberalism, socialism does need to be liberal and this includes limiting itself and pulling back from a totalistic approach.

This may all seem a long way from Starmerism. But, a pluralist democratic socialism is not confined to yet does include social democracy. If crime is to be a priority there are well-established alternative ways of tackling this at the root and by building community rather than the inhumanity of a system of adversarialism and punishment. Climate change is our most urgent challenge and all measures available need to be used to tackle it. Local cooperation has a proven record of building wealth for the community and sustainability, using approaches that build socialism by deed and by steps while meeting the priorities of those hesitant about radical socialist change. Collective ownership is back on the agenda and popular while equality has become reframed as between wealthy elites and all others, including the middle classes. COVID mainstreamed the less work and slow agenda, the role of alternatives to the family, and the importance of inclusive public education.

Starmer is ahead in the polls, as much because of Tory failure as his own appeal. He has managed to claw back some red wall voters and Brexiteers. But he seems to be heading for a minority government or a small majority at the next General Election. Less convinced are the
young, graduates, and those living in diverse areas. Young people are anti-Tory but not enthused by Starmer. The same goes for those who voted SNP last time around, a vital constituency for Labour. These groups are there to be won over, or they may lend their votes to Greens, LibDems, the SNP, or just not vote. A bold narrative and policies that appeal to them are vital.

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